

The Book

jojo's bizarre adventure 4th another day



Z



orsuichi

original concept Hirohiko Araki

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Hirohiko
Araki

SHUEISHA

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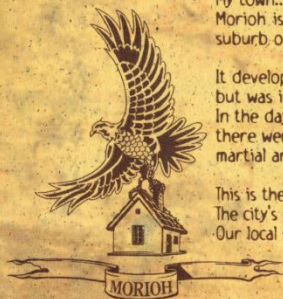
JOJO "Stand Up" MORIOH TOWN MAP



My town...
Morioh is a
suburb of S city.

It developed quickly during the 1980s
but was inhabited even in the ancient Jomon era.
In the days of the samurai,
there were many vacation homes and
martial arts training grounds here...

This is the city's symbol.
The city's flower is the amur adonis.
Our local speciality is the misozuke ox tongue.





My town...
Morioh is a
suburb of S city.

It developed quickly during the 19th century
but was inhabited even in the ancient times.
In the days of the samurai,
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hirohiko

designer: Hirohiko Araki

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Illustration

Hirohiko Araki

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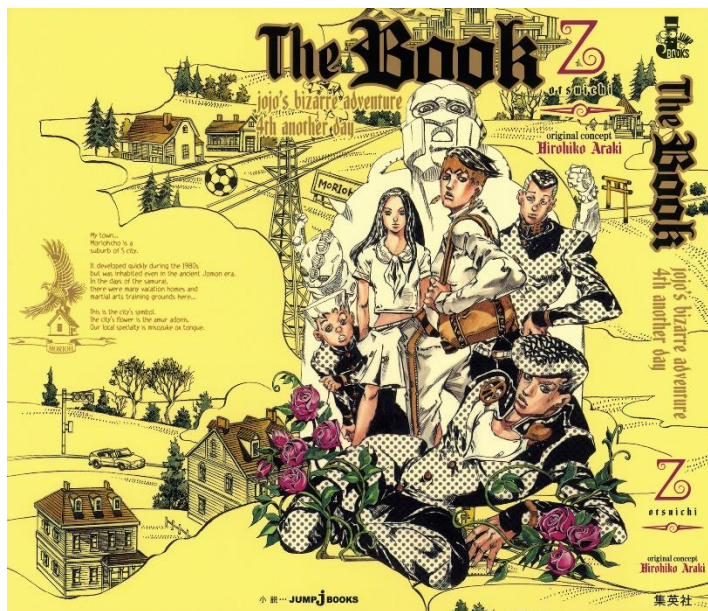
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design

Akira Saito, Hayoi Kameda(Yeja)

Paperback Covers



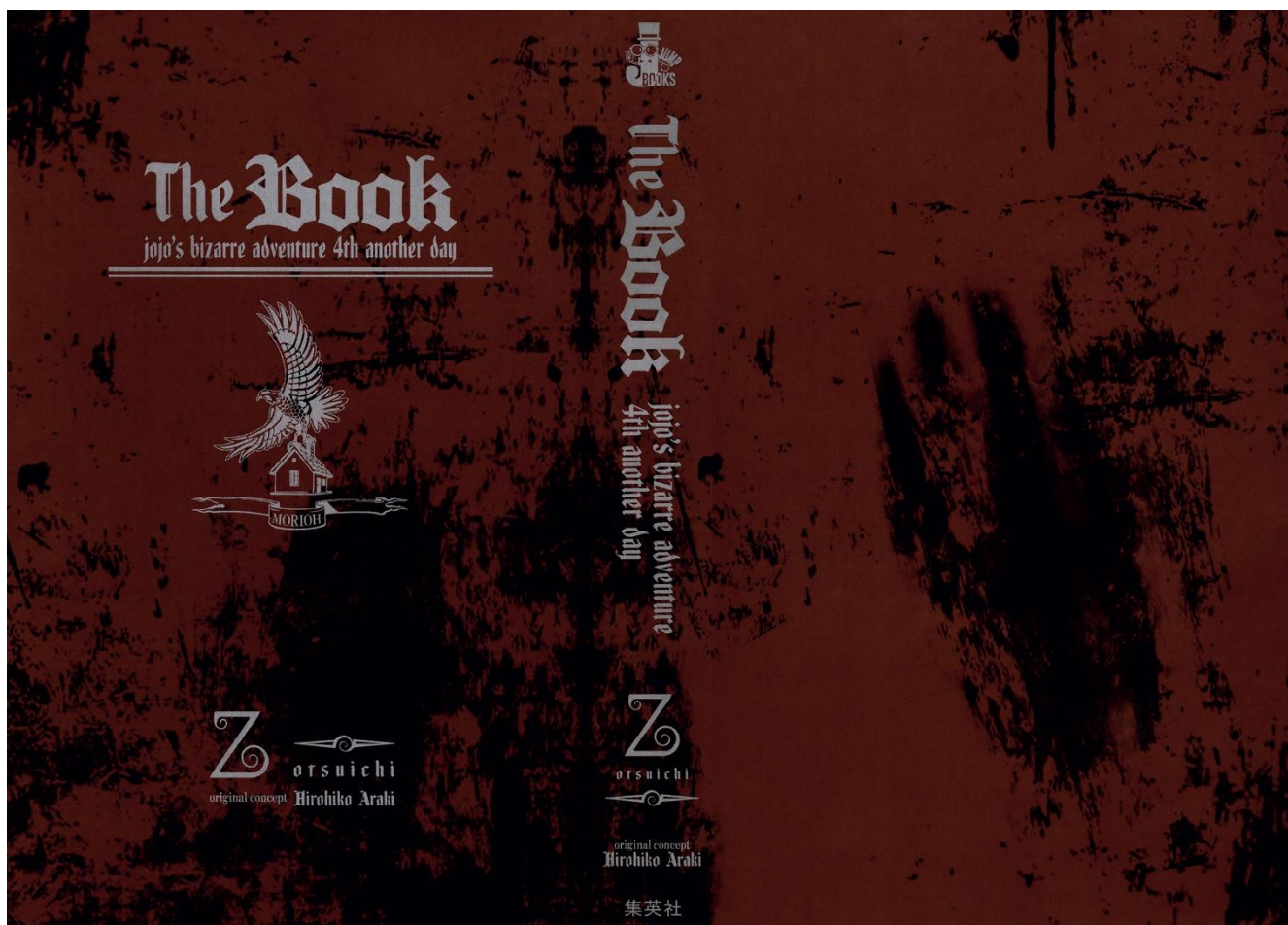
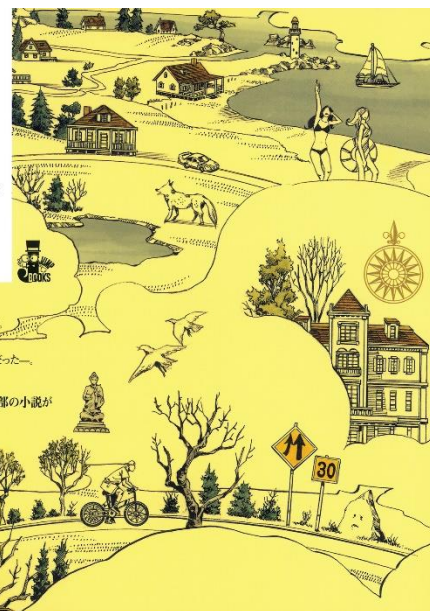


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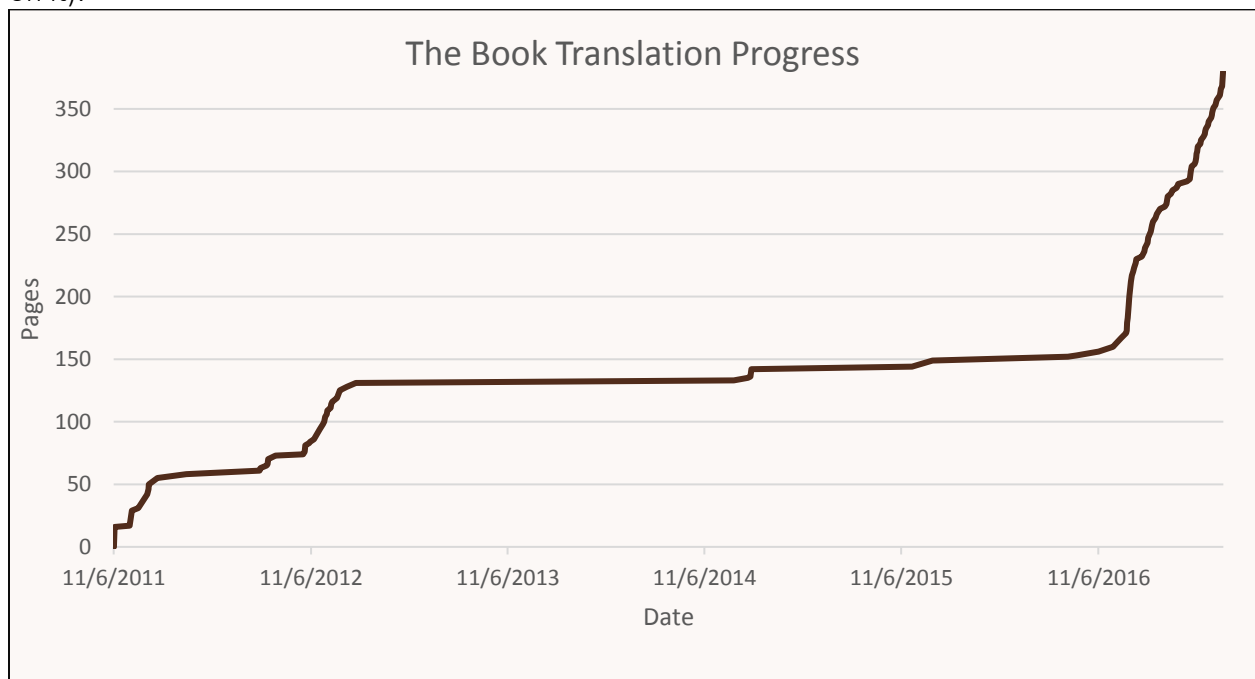
その日、広瀬康一と岸辺露伴は、
血まみれの猫と、そして死体に遭遇した。
それは、杜王町で起こった。
“本”を中心とした事件のはじまりだった。
乙一が渾身の力で挑んだ
“ジョジョの奇妙な冒険”第4部の小説が
新装版で登場!!



Translator's Introduction

Hi, it's Kewl0210, the translator of this novel and head of the scanlation group Hi Wa Mata Noboru. I thought I'd stick this in here to start off with. So, uh, I started translating this novel in November of 2011 and finished in July of 2017. There's a variety of reasons it's taken so long. All basically being that because this novel is "pure translation", something I'm doing completely on my own and having no due date, so I had to put it off again and again because it's such a long book (380 pages in Japanese) and I've had so many other projects translating anime and manga and the like in that time. Often for my own physical and mental health, otherwise I'd be kind of overworking myself, even more so than I normally do. In the period since I started this book and finished it I think I became a much different person, and a much better translator (So it took plenty of effort to edit the beginning up to my current standards), and quite a lot is probably exactly the same. But because this took so long and it's one novel finally releasing all at once after 5 years on and off of work, I just wanted to say thanks to anyone that's reading this. I wouldn't have spent all that time and effort if I didn't think this book was really something special and really worth reading. If you ask me, it stands up as a great novel even if it weren't a spinoff of Jojo's Bizarre Adventure (But that certainly makes it better), and for over 5 years now I've been thinking about how much I want to share it with people. That kind of thing is what's kept me coming back to this all this time until it was done.

Here's that journey in a handy chart form (I kept a log of my progress every day I worked on it):



Something interesting I've been thinking about recently is that Otsu Ichi took 5 years to write this book, throwing away full manuscripts multiple times because he felt they weren't good enough, and now it's taken over 5 and a half for me to translate it. Those two things aren't

related, but they're an interesting coincidence. Especially since I'm doing this as a fan translation. He wrote it from 2002 to 2007 (Or something like that, it came out in 2007, he might've finished it before then) and I translated it from late 2011 to mid-2017. So going from nothing to you reading this English version of this book sure has been quite a journey. Though it was only about a year of me constantly working on this, if you take out all the long breaks from it. And that's working in parallel with my current manga/translation projects (Meanwhile Otsu Ichi had to take up a second job in order to earn an income while he was writing this).

Also, if you're interested, a dedicated Japanese fan has been making a video-doujinshi of this book (Unfinished as of this writing. They might not be updating it anymore. But it covers most of the story) which you can see here: <http://www.nicovideo.jp/mylist/27778746> If you want to read along with watching that, be advised that some scenes of the novel are skipped or altered slightly and others are slightly out of order. I do recommend watching it though, it's really well done.

And maybe if you enjoyed this, check out our other projects at <http://hiwamatanoboru.com>

Also, thanks a ton for Em helping me edit (Which ended up being a much more arduous process than I'd imagined; taking most of July and some of August 2017. Doing some parts of this years after other parts, and most of the later parts in small bursts at 1-2AM when I wake up at 8:45AM, go figure how that happened). She went through the whole book and found tons of little things to improve how it sounded and flowed along with any mistakes. I can only hope I eventually get my writing style as good as hers.

Anyhow, that's about it. This represents a lot to me so I hope you enjoy it. I'm gonna go take a short break from translating to read *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust.

Enjoy.

-Kewl0210, August 2017

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乙一 Otsu Ichi

Original Concept, Illustrations: Hirohiko Araki

Design: Akira Saito, Yayoi Kaneda (Yeia)

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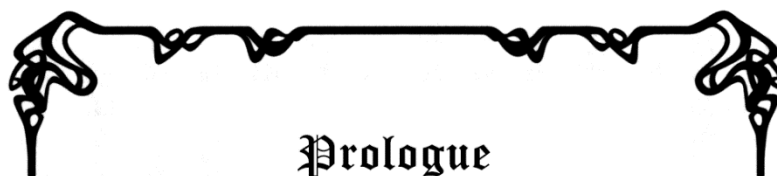
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Prologue



Introitus

Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine,
et lux perpetua luceat eis.

Te decet hymnus, Deus, in Sion,
et tibi reddetur votum in Jerusalem.

Exaudi orationem meam,
ad te omnis caro veniet.

Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine,
et lux perpetua luceat eis.

Prologue

Introitus

Requiem aernam dona eis, Domine,
et lux perpetua luceat eis.

Te decet hymnus Deus, in Sion,
et tibi reddetur votum in Ierusalem.

Exaudi orationem meam;
ad te omnis caro veniet.

Requiem aernam dona eis, Domine,
et lux perpetua luceat eis.

[TL Note: These are part of the Christian Requiem Mass, a mass celebrated for the repose of the soul of a deceased person or persons. The text is originally in Latin and is translated below.]

Grant them eternal rest, O Lord,
and let perpetual light shine upon them.
A hymn becomes you, O God, in Zion,
and to you shall a vow be repaid in Jerusalem.
Hear my prayer;
to you shall all flesh come.
Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord,
and let perpetual light shine upon them.

Two girls on a sandy beach. People playing baseball and nearby there's a soccer ball. A cycling road and an enigmatic torii gate that a car could pass through. Lovely free-standing houses that looked like miniatures. Because when you look up at the sky spreading over this town, you barely see any power lines. I heard that they were buried underground when the town was redeveloped.

There were still several iron towers used for electric supplies remaining in the Northwest area of the town. In a high school classroom I once heard a rumor there was a man that lived in one of them. At first I thought that was just a tall tale, but it wasn't. Using binoculars, I tried looking at the iron tower in question, and sure enough a man was living in it. On a high up steel beam several dozen meters above the ground, there was a small portable stove, a frying pan, and even a rolled-out futon. A laundry rope was hung between two girders, where washed clothes were drying. That man walked the balance beams that were its iron frame with deft precision, caught a sparrow with a trap, plucked the feathers and cooked it. He lived a full life for months without ever leaving the iron tower. But he was not utterly cut off from the outside world, it seemed. People would bring him things like candy and spices and he would gladly chat with them. He, this man who lived in the iron tower and never left, at some point became known as the iron tower man to the town's citizens.

'Do you think it's possible to live without ever leaving an iron tower?' Futaba Chiho asked her senpai. As he continued to walk, her senpai answered.

'A long time ago there was a woman who lived between two buildings for an entire year. So a man living in an iron tower doesn't seem that farfetched.'

Whether that story was true or just an urban legend, Chiho didn't know.

On the night of the school term closing ceremony, Futaba Chiho killed someone. In a kitchen, she stabbed someone she loved in the chest with a kitchen knife. Shortly before that person died, they said this:

'This is my ability. I've named it "Memory of Jet"...'

Chapter 1



Kyrie

Kyrie eleison.
Christe eleison.
Kyrie eleison.

Chapter 1

Kyrie

Kyrie eleison.
Christe eleison.
Kyrie eleison.

[TL Note: This is the second prayer said in Requiem Mass. Originally in Greek, it translates to the following.]

Lord

Lord have mercy;
Christ have mercy;
Lord have mercy.

---1---

It was a few days since it had become year 2000. I was submerged up to my neck in games and manga. I lay down on an electronic carpet and counted up my new year's money while wondering what else to buy with it, and before I knew it there were only three days left in winter break. I also realized I had completely forgotten to get my homework assignment done. Impatiently starting math problems I hadn't done was how I spent the morning of January 4th. But no matter how much I opened up the book and started at the formulas, I couldn't understand them at all. No matter how much I rolled and spun my pencil, I really couldn't get them. It was at that point that I thought that I really needed to take a breather. I decided to go to the convenience store to buy a meat bun. Walking through the cold winter wind, I went to my closest convenience store, Sun Mart. I stood around reading gaming magazines and checked the reviews for the newest games. I also picked up a manga magazine and looked over the authors' comments written on the table of contents page.

On the table of contents page of my favorite manga magazine, the serialized authors would always write one comment each. Each comment was only around forty characters long, but they were fun because you could get a glimpse at the author's true face. Though I'd imagine it's a pain for the authors to put together a comment to put in every week. As I read the magazine, keenly aware of the shop's employee staring at me, the comment of Kishibe Rohan entered my corner of my eye. Kishibe Rohan is a mangaka famous all throughout Japan. He debuted at age 16 and from then up until now at age 20, he's rushed to the forefront of the manga world. The manga he draws, *Pink Dark Boy*, contains grotesque expressions, individualistic characters, and

discriminative sound effects, and the cool poses he draws on the volume covers capture the hearts of the readers. His comment went something like this:

'Though only a mere 50 days went by in the story, the long Part 3 finally ends with this chapter. Starting next chapter is Part 4.'

I was really excited for that. After such a thrilling Part 3, I wondered what kind of story would be coming next. While daydreaming about that, I bought a meat bun and left the store. And by the side of the road was the bent-down thin frame of a young man giving food to a cat. It was Kishibe Rohan.

'Ah, well if it isn't Kouichi-kun?'

'What are you up to?'

'Just watch and you'll find out.'

Around the biscuit shaped cat treats he was sprinkling around, 34 cats gathered. If you're wondering why a famous mangaka is living in this town far in the Northeast region of Japan, it's because this is his hometown. I've known him since the beginning of last summer. Since then, for some reason, he's taken an odd liking to me and we call each other friends. His more enthusiastic fans get really jealous when they see me, but it's not like I hang out with him all the time.

'Heh. I didn't know you were type to dote on other living creatures.'

The cats seemed to enjoy the food Kishibe Rohan was giving them. It was a charming sight until the cats started to drool and slump down wearily.

'Sensei...?'

All 34 cats lay down. Feeling nervous, I looked up at Kishibe Rohan.

'Calm down. I've only mixed sleeping drugs into them.'

He picked up one gray cat from among the 34 and held it in his arms. He gripped his front legs and pointed them toward me. The cat was asleep and didn't wake up.

'Look at his paw pads. They're dirty with ink. I heard noise going on in my work room and when I went to investigate my desk had been made a mess of. Ink bottles were overturned and pen nibs and writing materials were strewn all over. I had opened a window to get some air; I shouldn't have done that. I found a manuscript I had been drawing stamped with what looked like the paw prints of a cat. So as it would seem, this little guy is the culprit. I hated cats to begin with, so this guy really set me off. Did you know this, Kouichi-kun? In Guangzhou, there used to be a civilization that ate cats. They have some great nutritional value, apparently. I heard there was even a cat-eating civilization in Okinawa. I wonder just what flavor it is they have?'

Even now, his long thin fingers looked like they were strangling the gray cat's neck.

'I'm just kidding. As if I would eat something like a cat.'

Kishibe Rohan looked at me and a smile that looked like the devil rose to his face.

'But it would seem that this one is a stray cat. I can't even seek compensation from an owner.'

'What kind of responsible adult does something like this? You went out of your way to get sleeping drugs so you could catch a cat? If you have time to do something like this, then what about thinking of what to do for *Pink Dark Boy* Part 4?'

'Part 4? I'm thinking about it. Much more than that, I've already come up with the entire plot to Part 9.'

'Is that another joke...?'

Kishibe Rohan's face remained serious.

'What, really?'

'I've finished everything from the story to the exact spoken lines. All that's left is to draw it all into manuscripts.'

He laid the cat on the ground and methodically brushed off the fur that had stuck to his clothes. He then took a cell phone out of his pocket.

'I'll have someone from the animal shelter come and take charge of him. Don't misunderstand; I'm not doing this because I'm angry at it.'

That was a lie. With a delighted look on his face, Kishibe Rohan began to dial the phone.

'Maybe we shouldn't. There might be someone who looks after this cat around here, and it just doesn't have a collar.'

As I said this, he suddenly stopped moving. He was staring at a specific point and didn't even blink.

'Rohan-sensei?'

I called out to him as he stood there not saying a word.

Morior is a town in Northeastern Japan where the winters were significantly cold. The breath we exhaled turned white and scattered into the blowing wind. There weren't many cars passing on the street next to Sun Mart, and it was relatively quiet. A woman came out of the store's doors, stopped, and let out a short scream. One of the store's employees came outside and frowned, then covered his mouth with his hand. Kishibe Rohan turned his eyes to my back.

'What the hell's with that cat?' Kishibe Rohan muttered.

When we weren't looking, another cat had come from somewhere to eat some of the cat food scattered about the side of the road. It poked the biscuit-shaped food with its forepaws, sniffed it with the tip of its nose, put it in its mouth, and chewed it with a noisy crunch. It was a short haired cat, but it was hard to tell what color it had originally been, because its whole body seemed to be splattered with blood. I didn't know right away if it was really blood or not, but it at least looked like it. It also seemed to have been on the cat's hair for more than half a day, as it had turned nearly black. Did it get like this from rolling around in a pool of blood? Maybe because of the stickiness of the blood, the cat's fur was horribly disheveled. The cat looked like its own body had

suffered some massive wounds, but it hadn't. Both its front and back legs were moving normally, and it even seemed to have an appetite. So if that really was blood, that means it got stuck to the cat somewhere else. As we caught our breath and stared at it, the cat drooled and lay down, off to dreamland perhaps with the aid of the sleeping drugs.

That day, Morioh got colder. The pond near the bus terminal turned to ice and pet dogs just crouched down and didn't even try to move an inch, it was so cold. White flecks of snow crossed in front of our eyes and gently landed on the ground. We had never imagined it. That the appearance of a blood-splattered cat, because of its connection to the discovery of a dead body, would mark the curtain rising on a case that would take three months to solve. Yet this was only the beginning from our perspective. Though one could say that the story had started long before that. We had only started participating in his life part-way through it. It may even be best to start the story off back when he was just a tiny cell in his mother's womb.



---2---

Until recently, Morioh had just been a rural town where one could only find rice and vegetable fields. The whole area of the Northeast has been known as a summer retreat since the days of old. Even now, there are still many villas of samurais left. However, Hirai Akari wasn't interested in her birth place's history. So even if she heard about the samurai villas, it went in one ear and out the other. Quite the opposite; when she was a child she felt nothing but embarrassment about this country town. After becoming an adult, she's thought about leaving for the city and living a life like the ones she sees on TV dramas. The sight of her parents running an agriculture business made her afraid that she would just rot away in the country. Her mother's hands were hard and cracked, and she just couldn't stand the idea of her hands ending up like that, too. She just wasn't into the idea of planting rice and heading out in the middle of the night to check on the water in the paddy fields.

She attended a junior college in the city after she graduated high school, but when she couldn't find a job she went back to Morioh. In the short time she was gone, she was surprised to find that the town had spruced up quite a bit. It was like Morioh had undergone a complete transformation. It was an age in which scenery all over Japan was getting better. S City of M Prefecture, adjacent to Morioh, was undergoing lots of forays to new enterprises. People working there were seeking to take up residence nearby and so they surged into Morioh. The town's population shot up rapidly. In order to develop Morioh, M Prefecture's government officials decided to invest a large amount of money in it. Enticed by the potential revenue of the large shopping mall, Kameyuu Market, the streets were repaired. There were pretty houses lined up on the land that used to be rice fields. Power lines were buried in the ground and the majority of the telephone poles that harmed the beautiful views disappeared.

Akari decided to take a job in Morioh, but she wasn't going back to her country bumpkin family; she decided to take a one-room apartment in front of the train station. She took an interview at a home-sales office and got a job as an office clerk. It was a company that dealt with the planning, production, and buying and selling of houses. There was a lack of energetic workers in this industry which was needed for the explosively expanding town of Morioh. When Akari was arranging paperwork at her job, she fell in love with a young architect who worked there.

Oogami Teruhiko was involved in the planning of apartments and hotels. He had good looks, but he didn't go out to the drinking parties other employees had much, and when he did he would sit in a corner and stay quiet. When you went to talk to him, you'd find a calm demeanor and a suave, level-headed personality. He was the type that, rather than spend time with a large group of people, would prefer to draw lines on his blueprints. He generally never spoke to anyone at the company, so no one but Akari knew of his incredible sense of humor.

It was when they went on a trip to Europe together that she discovered this hidden aspect of his personality. The two of them stood on top of a line of hills together and gazed out at old neighborhoods during a sunset. While they listened to the sound of the church bells echoing in the air, he said this to her: 'look at the faces of the children playing over there. With one glance, you can tell that this town's stone paving and buildings are loved in a way that transcends the ages. That's the kind of town I want to make. I'm only one puny architect, but when I look at the growing number of buildings, I feel like this job has a direct impact on the development of this town. It makes me think about the children of Morioh that have yet to be born. There's a growing population in that town. There are quite a few new babies being born right now. I want to make a town that those children can hold their heads up high and be proud of.'

That was the end of July in 1981. One day, the phone rang at Akari's station. 'Could I please speak to Hirai Akari?'

It was a woman's voice.

'Yes, this is she.'

'You're Akari-san? Well, there's something I want to talk to you about regarding Oogami-san.' In the brief period that followed, the woman told her a few things that were hard to believe.

'Please search his room. Because there should be illegal blueprints there. He's making a deal behind the company's back. He's been cutting down on the building materials and planning buildings as cheaply as possible, using the kinds of substitutes that would fall in an instant if there were an earthquake. Who am I, you ask? His lover. I don't know which number I am, but I've known him since we were in our teens. My name is Orikasa Hanae. The kanjis are from 'weave' with the thread side radical, 'bamboo hat' with the top radical for bamboo, the simple kanji for 'flower' with the grass radical on top, and 'blessing'. Orikasa Hanae (織笠花恵). If you don't believe me, why don't you go confront him about it?'

The call cut out right after that. She pretended to go to the bathroom to sneak away from work, and then went into his house using the spare key he had given her. She didn't find any documents to indicate wrongdoings or unfaithfulness, but she did find a travel bag hidden in the ceiling. In it, she found a large number of rolls of 10,000 yen bills. She didn't know how much it was exactly, but there was over 50 million yen. The woman who had called herself Orikasa Hanae may have been telling the truth. Hirai Akari took the bag with the large amount of money in it with her and phoned the station where he was working. 'I don't know what number she is, but a woman who said she's your lover contacted me today.'

I think it you'd have to be pretty stupid to believe a call like that.'

'Well I don't believe it, but why is this Orikasa Hanae person making contact with me like this?'

'Why don't we talk about this in person?'

'Okay, I'll be waiting on the roof of the company building at 6 PM.'

It was already nearly dark by the time of the meeting because of the clouds covering the sky and the building became quiet as the other employees in the company went home.

There was a waist-height fence around the roof which she leaned on as she waited for him. It started to drizzle, so she took out a handkerchief to wipe the raindrops off her face. A sudden gust of wind blew the handkerchief right out of her hand, and it fell slowly into the gap between the company building and the adjacent multi-tenant building.

At precisely 6PM, Oogami Teruhiko confronted her on the roof. She wanted to know the truth. She wanted to know if the words that had passed between them were all false or not.

In the end, not much conversing occurred, because before much could be said, Oogami Teruhiko was strangling her.

Drops of water falling on her face, Hirai Akari awoke from sleep. As she tried to rouse herself, she felt a pain like an iron stake had been driven into her back. She wondered how long she had been unconscious; she had a strange feeling in her throat and couldn't breathe clearly. Every time she took a breath, she choked and wheezed.

She had collapsed in wet mud. Her clothes and hair were splattered with mud as well, and there were cardboard boxes and empty cans strewn around her in the darkness. After staring for a bit, she finally figured out where she was. On both sides of her, two walls rose up further than she could see and she was lying there sandwiched in between them. It was so narrow that she couldn't stretch both her arms out. Next to her was something she recognized. It was the handkerchief that had been carried away earlier by the wind.

It seemed that of the two buildings she was between, one was of the home-sales business building that she and Oogawa Teruhiko worked at. Looking up, she saw the fence she had been leaning on just a little while ago above her head.

And on the other side was the adjacent multi-tenant building.

Both walls extended parallel up high into the sky and in the small gap at the very top she could see rain clouds. It was a narrow space that looked like it had been drawn with a ruler. Because of the rain dripping down from the roof, the walls were wet.

She wondered if she had been pushed off the roof. And if she had, why was she still alive? She thought about it, though her mind was still hazy. Perhaps the wet and soft mud had absorbed the impact of the fall, or maybe the cardboard boxes and cans had cushioned her body.

She didn't see him. Maybe he'd left, thinking she was dead.

Though her body was coursing with pain, she managed to stand up. She combed her hair with her fingers, removing a large amount of mud from it. It made a wet sound as it hit the ground. She groped along the walls to find her way in the darkness.

Moving along the wall, she soon arrived at something that prevented her from moving any further. Attached to the outside of the walls were pipes that tangled into each other like a dense forest, blocking Akari's path. She stretched her arm through a space in the pipes and tried to call for help to the people walking on the street. Beyond the pipes there were things that looked like parts of air conditioners set up all around so she couldn't see the down the path between the buildings. Akari shouted to the other side.

'Help!'

The narrow space between the buildings glowed white. As if to tear apart what she saw in front of her, a bolt of lightning shot down. There was no sign that anyone had heard Akari's voice. She realized that, because work hours had ended and everyone had left the company building, the street would be pretty much void of any people.

She tried going to the back of the building to get out that way, but she quickly realized that wouldn't work either, as there was another wall blocking the way. It was the back of the bank in front of the train station. It was built like a lid shutting her into the gap. It seemed that the adjacent buildings were built just barely not touching it, leaving no more than 15 centimeters between them. It would be impossible for her to squeeze through that way and get out by going around the back of the building.

It's okay, she told herself. It's not like she washed up on a desert island in a distant sea or something. She was smack in the middle of a town. If she kept calling for help, someone would eventually hear her. The rain dripped down into the mud and also got into her mouth and eyes. She even forgot about wiping it off and just kept calling for help. This went on for a whole hour, but she didn't get a reply. The sound of thunder and the rain dripping down the walls was all she could hear.

Come morning, the company employees going to work would be bustling outside. That would be her chance. She just needed to hold out here for one night. Someone would hear her voice and see her down here from the roof. And as soon as she was rescued, she would call the police.

At any rate, why did she get a phone call like that? Orikasa Hanae, Akari was sure the woman had called herself. She had claimed she was one on a long list of lovers that man had had. If Akari hadn't picked up that phone, nothing like this would ever have happened. Really, she wasn't sure whether it was better to have found out all this and meet with this misfortune, or to have remained blissfully ignorant.

Akari curled up and went to sleep. The pain in her back had abated, but now her whole body was getting cold. When she closed her eyes, the thought of her parents came into her head.

It was the same as back then, she thought. When she was going to junior college it was her first time in the city and she was also living alone for the first time. On her first night, she laid down in a room with almost no furniture. It felt like she'd come to the end of the world and she couldn't really get to sleep. Even though so many people were living out in the town, no one even knew that she existed. Before she knew it, she was thinking about her parents, and trying to endure the anxiety she felt. The only people who knew she was living in that room were her mother and father, living far away in the countryside. She was confident that her mother and father were thinking about her.

'You should be thankful for your good fortune, to fall from that height and actually survive.'

As she heard that voice coming from above, Akari opened her eyes. The light from a flashlight came down from the roof. The gap between the buildings was illuminated and the falling raindrops stood out in the light.

'I'd intended to kill you, but it seems I was a little too easy-going in the way I strangled you. That damn Orikasa, I can't believe she did something as stupid as call you. Maybe she was jealous. Our relationship was going well, so she wanted to do something to upset things.'

It was a man whose voice she thought may stay with her for the rest of her life.

---3---

'I was a little surprised when I saw it; I thought it was blood. But it's really something different, isn't it? It's not unthinkable that it could be red paint or strawberry jam or something like that. And even if it were blood, I'm sure it's something like fish blood that it got on it from some fish store.'

'You think this is jam or paint? Of course not. This is real blood. Look at the way it's dried and how viscous it is. This thing got some real blood on its body someplace, like perhaps from nestling up to the body of someone who had collapsed and was covered in blood.'

Why was this cat covered in blood? In front of the Sun Mart, Kishibe Rohan and I exchanged opinions.

'You don't see a person collapsed and covered in blood too much.'

Those with the occupation of mangaka must have a richer imagination than most people.

'Then let's go investigate,' Kishibe Rohan said.

The cat had a black cloth collar with a silver heart-shaped nameplate hanging from it. It also had what looked like a cat's name engraved on it in katakana along with a phone number and the owner's name written in small characters. We wrote down that information and left that spot, assuming that the Sun Mart owner would do something about the cat. Anyhow, Kishibe Rohan's curiosity was really incredible. He was in a state of mind where he just had to know why the cat was covered in blood (even though we still weren't really sure if it was blood). When we had met with this little mystery, he had shown such a strong interest. He was probably thinking that he could use it as content for his manga. Thanks to this, the gray cat that had made a mess of his work room was saved. Kishibe Rohan was now entranced in a completely different matter, and he didn't care one bit about getting it to an animal shelter now.

First, he tried calling the phone number that was engraved on the nameplate. It did nothing but ring on the other end; the owner didn't pick up. Having no other choice, we used the name and phone number to look up the owner's address.

We asked people, looked at maps, and in 15 minutes we found the house of the cat we had found earlier. It was a free-standing Western style house with a garden. The front door had a small cat door in it. Written on the doorplate was the same name as the one we had found on the cat's collar. We were sure this was it.

We rang the doorbell but there was no answer. Without a moment of restraint, Kishibe Rohan started walking along the side of the house. Flakes of snow were dropping from the sky, pouring onto Morioh. When we stepped on the withered lawn and fallen leaves, it brought forth a melancholy sound from beneath our shoes.

As we went along the wall and came upon the garden, I started to feel regretful. But there was one thing I knew for sure: if I just went home then, I was certain that I wouldn't feel like solving those math problems. The area was lonely and quiet, so the

sound of our clothes rustling sounded awfully loud. Kishibe Rohan put his hand on his chin and made a frustrated face.

We left the property, and were both taking deep breaths over and over again. A car let out exhaust as it passed in front of me. The world continued like it were any other day, which gave me some sense of relief. Kishibe Rohan was walking back toward the garden so I asked him, 'Where are you going?' He replied back, 'I'm going to walk a lap around the house; you can just stay there.' I fought back nausea as I waited for him to come back.

'I can't find any unlocked windows.' he said, walking back towards me.

'Only the cat door is open. Otherwise the entire house is locked down. I could just see it through the window, and saw a key on the living room table, which leads me to believe that it wasn't locked from the *outside*.'

'Let's just call an ambulance already.'

'If we're calling anything, it's a patrol car. It was clearly abnormal, that corpse. It wasn't decrepit or sickly. The person died in a unique way. Did you see the bruise on the thigh?'

'No.'

'Was the death caused by some sort of high impact? Her skirt was turned up. The area near the base of her right thigh had become discolored a disgusting tinge. And the shape of the bruise, it was almost like... No, I'll hold off for now. Hey, hold it in! Don't throw up! Right now we need to go report this to the police.'

'That sounds like a good idea.'

I called the police on my cell phone.

'Hello, police....? This is going to be a little difficult to explain, but...'

There was no smell of decay. Perhaps the cold had kept the scent from drifting too far. Even so, I resisted breathing in too much. When we were standing in the garden before, I tried as hard as I could not to inhale. There was a big, rectangular, glass window facing the garden. The curtains were pulled back, giving us a clear view of house's living room. A woman was collapsed on the floor next to the window. She was on her side with her left shoulder underneath her. A large puddle of blood spread around her, leaving almost the entire floor red. No human could still be alive after losing that much blood. Her eyelids were open and her eyes looked like they were gazing at something far away. Because of the shrubs in front of the window, you couldn't see into the living room window from that far off. That must be why no one had found her until then.

I told the police I was the only one who found her, something I did at the request of Kishibe Rohan. He went a short distance away in order to pose as a curious onlooker for when the police arrived. Being as famous as he was, him discovering the corpse would've just made an even bigger commotion. It really didn't feel right to me, but there

wasn't really a better option. I was a fan of Kishibe Rohan, and didn't like the idea of spreading his name around the world in connection to something like this.

'My name? It's Hirose Kouichi. I'm a first year at Budougaoka High School. No, she wasn't an acquaintance. I found a cat and then visited the house. I think the cat probably rubbed against her. When I found it, it had blood all... The deceased was a woman. Her name? It was probably 'Oriksa Hanae'. That's the name written on the doorplate. And on the cat's nameplate, too. The kanjis are from 'weave' with the thread side radical, 'bamboo hat' with the top radical for bamboo, the simple kanji for 'flower' with the grass radical on top, and 'blessing'.'

---4---

She liked reading ever since she was little. The smell of old books made her heart feel at ease. Her favorite genre was the kind of children's books they had at her school library. Her next most favorite were picture books with pop-up pictures in them.

Ever since her 6th year of elementary school, her Mom and Dad would fight. She couldn't concentrate on reading over the sound of her mother breaking dishes, so when she reached the age of 12, Futaba Chiho ran away from home. She decided that for now, she would go to the bus terminal in front of the station and ride far away on the express bus to S City.

She bought doughnuts and sat on the bench of the bus terminal, waiting for the bus to leave. She wondered what on earth there could be outside the town and before long, she felt scared. She couldn't think of any place she should go to now that he had left home and left the town. She had been born and raised in this town, and had always planned to stay there her whole life. The name of the town was Morioh. The town specialty was misozuke ox tongue.

Futaba Chiho sat on the bench and sighed, then took a bite of her favorite snack: doughnuts. She had bought them from the bakery in front of the station. When she'd munched about half of the doughnut, a deep sense of sadness washed over her, and she thought she would try to get home by dinner.

At that point, a delinquent high school boy came up to her and sat right next to her. There were gigantic gold earrings hanging from his ears. When she stood up to try to leave, he grabbed her arm and forced her back down.

'Don't look so scared. I ain't gonna do anything.'

It was a lie. In 3 minutes, he forcibly brought Chiho behind the station. He had told her that if she screamed, something really bad would happen to her. The delinquent high school boy took Chiho's wallet from her and spotted the credit card that was inside. Right before she'd left home, she had stolen it out of her father's wallet. She was so afraid she could barely stay standing up.

'Don't beg for your life.'

It was a boy's voice, but it came from behind the delinquent high schooler. At some point, a boy of about the same age as Chiho had come up to them. The boy's arms and legs were thin, he was like a doll made of knit-together wires. It wasn't cold out yet, but he was covered up to his wrists with a long sleeved shirt and wore black from head to toe.

'You were just about to plead for help, right? The kind of person that does that stays a loser until the day they die.'

He had sharp, narrow eyes that made him look like he was glaring. The boy stared at Chiho. They were pitch black eyes that made her think of the void of space. And in a cold tone, the boy spoke to the delinquent.

'And you, I don't like anybody who steals money from an elementary schooler. When I saw you taking her into the bushes, I thought you were planning to do something sexual.'

'Who the hell're you?' the delinquent threatened, but the boy didn't flinch.

'That girl. Take your dirty hands off her. I'll bet you don't even wash them after you pee, do you?'

The boy took a small knife out of his pocket. The knife was covered with scratches that looked like the result of many years of use.

After that, she remembered the boy and the delinquent exchanging some words back and forth. But, even when she was later questioned by a policeman about what had happened, Chiho wasn't able to explain in detail. The next thing Chiho knew, she was sitting alone on the bench.

Most likely, the boy had used the knife to do it. There was an ear on the ground near Chiho, and there was a gold earring in the earlobe. The delinquent high schooler had collapsed behind the station. It was nothing life-threatening, but when he was found, he was really shaken up.

In the end, she didn't know who that that demon-boy-like child was. When asked by the policeman about the boy's appearance, she said she couldn't see his face well because of the bright light behind him. But that was so the policeman's investigation wouldn't extend to the boy. In actuality, she could remember the boy's face quite clearly. She held that memory dearly in her mind so she would never forget it.

When she became a middle school student, she would go to a family restaurant on the way back from school a lot with the female close friends of hers. They always went to the place next to Kameyuu Market. Because there were never a lot of customers there when they went, it wasn't likely they'd be seen by any teachers. And that meant they could relax while still wearing their uniforms. They would order from the drink bar and everyone would pass around shoujo manga until it got dark outside. During test time, the tables would be covered in notes and text books and they'd study. Everyone had translucent red desk pads.

One day in her second year of middle school, Chiho stopped by the usual family restaurant on her way home. That day, it was only her and a close friend with braided hair she'd been friends with since elementary school. Thinking that everyone else would come later, they got a table for six, but no matter how long they waited, no one else came.

'We haven't all gone home together in a while, huh?'

Chiho asked her friend, interrupting her book. What Chiho had been reading was a book she'd borrowed from the town library, *Gulliver's Travels*.

Her braided friend responded without lifting her head out of a movie magazine.

'They're probably all with boys.'

'Yeah, that's what I thought. No wonder...'

The number of couples around them had been increasing. Since not too long before, good friends of hers had become a little flighty and had been borrowing and trying out makeup. She had still yet to be introduced into the world of makeup. Her only experience with it was when she was very little and played with her mother's lipstick and got yelled at.

'Our drink bar club might be over with, too...'

She said, looking at the empty seats, and sighed. Her friend took scissors out of her bag and cut out a Hollywood star that was printed in the magazine.

'We could keep going with just the two of us for a while, I guess.'

'Who knows what'll happen year after next, though,' she said as she pasted the paper-thin Hollywood star into her notebook.

'Year after next?'

Was the world going to end or something? The year after next was 1999 after all, so it kinda seemed like something one might imagine.

'You know, we're going to high school. Chiho, you're gonna go to Budougauka High School, right? I'm not, though.'

'Huh? Are you not going to high school?'

'Sorry, but I'm not going to a school like that full of delinquents. I'm aiming for a school one rank higher.'

It was her first time hearing this. When Chiho pressed her for details, she explained her goal school was an all-girls high school in S City. It turned out that she was preparing for further along in her future. In order to study English in earnest after she graduated high school, she was planning to live overseas for a while. Her goal was to be an interpreter for Hollywood stars.

'Chiho, is there a job or anything you'd want to do in the future?'

She'd never thought about it.

By the time they left the family restaurant, it was already night time. The lights from the nearby Kameyuu Market faintly lit the night sky. Kameyuu Market was a giant shopping center just like the kind that appeared in American movies. In order to light up the huge parking lot, it had lights like the kind they used for night baseball games.

'Do you want to stop by Kameyuu?' She asked.

'Okay,' her friend replied.

They crossed the sprawling parking lot and entered the store. But there wasn't anything there she wanted to buy. It was just hard for her to say goodbye to her friend. They just chatted as they walked down random aisles, and when they passed in front of the cosmetics department, and a bright idea came to Chiho.

'Why don't we buy this?'

Chiho picked up the cheapest foundation there. She felt embarrassed when she paid at the register. It was the first time in her life she'd bought something like that

herself. It seemed like it was the same for her friend; she looked a little uncomfortable. They sat down on a bench outside the store. As the cool autumn breeze blew, they alternated applying it to their faces. The light of the vending machine attracted a few bugs. Looking in a mirror, they *did* feel at least a little bit more gorgeous.

She said goodbye to her friend and went home, and the inside of her house was awfully quiet. In the dining kitchen, silent with the TV off, her mother and father were sitting facing each other. Apparently, they had been talking about it for a long time but it was the first day she'd heard that it was official. Though the atmosphere had felt that way for a long time, so the news that they were getting divorced wasn't a big shock.

She was lying stretched out on her bed when a knock came on the door. She answered, the door opened slightly, and her mother's face peeked through. Chiho was lying down so her mother came in and sat on the bed.

Her mother stroked Chiho's cheek with the tips of her fingers, and then stared at what was stuck to her fingers. For some reason a feeling of guilt spread through her heart.

'I tried putting it on myself for the first time before. With a friend, on a bench outside.'

'You should take it off with cleansing cream. It'll irritate your skin.'

She went with her mother to the bathroom. Her mom lent her some moisturizer for taking makeup off. The whole time Chiho was washing her face, her mother watched her from behind.

She couldn't sleep, even late into the night. A book she was trying to read was open, but with all the ideas swirling in her head, she couldn't get into reading it. She figured she needed to get her heart and mind organized and decided to open the notebook on her desk and write a diary. It was her first time doing something like that, but she attempted to write down all of her thoughts from beginning to end without leaving anything out. She had a feeling that the things she'd seen and heard today would be important in her life. Boys, the future, makeup, divorce...

As she made her pen run across the page, it began to get brighter outside her window before she even knew it. Checking the clock, she was surprised to find several hours had passed. It felt like time had been erased by someone. She looked down at what she'd written and saw that she'd filled up the entire notebook and would need to start on a second one. She even amazed herself at how much she'd been able to write. Being good at Japanese composition in the first place, she really liked writing down her thoughts. But after re-reading her sentences one more time, it was closer to the style of a novel than a diary.

Up until now, although this wasn't her first time thinking about this sort of thing, she was never serious about writing. She had not consciously blocked that image out of her mind. But when she imagined herself becoming an author in the future, she held

onto it tight so it couldn't get away. And she began to think of that as what she wanted to become.

If she wrote a novel and that was seen by the eyes of the public, nothing could be more wonderful. The idea of a book she wrote sitting on the shelves of a book store was so far from reality she couldn't even fathom it. But if she arrived at a future where that *did* happen, then even if her family were split up, they could look at her book on the shelf of a bookstore and it might remind them. Remind them of the long past where they spent time together.

As the end of her third year of middle school drew near, so came time for high school entrance exams, which all went by without incident. The braided hair girl took the test for the S City all-girls school and passed. While Chiho felt lonely knowing she wouldn't be around, the school she was progressing to, Budougaoka High School, had a lot of people she was friendly with that were also going.

It was in the Morioh Municipal Library that she spotted that boy. There was a library just past the shopping district. It was built on huge grounds, had a road from the gate to the building that was paved with brick, and there was a garden with a pond and a fountain as well as an oddly shaped monument. It was a three-story old western-style building that had been remodeled in the Meiji Era. It strongly resembled a certain red brick government office building in Sapporo, but this building was covered with intertwining thorn vines without a single gap in between them. So it had come to be called the "Thorn Building" by the local residents.

There were barely any people at the reading space in the literature corner on that day. She was reading *The Neverending Story* and was surprised how never-ending the contents really were. She decided to stop for a while after getting to the end of a chapter, then she put her head up and stretched. Without her noticing, a high school boy had sat down and started reading in one of the empty seats. She didn't hear any footsteps from him coming into the reading room or the sound of him pulling out a chair or sitting down. Maybe because she was so focused on reading? But she got an odd feeling like he had suddenly appeared out of thin air. He was wearing a Budougaoka High School uniform. Looking at his face in profile as he stared down at a book, she gasped. He looked just like the boy who had saved her near the bus station four years ago. A breeze came in from the open window, flipping pages of *The Neverending Story*.

If she went to the Thorn Building there was a good chance she'd see him there, but she didn't have the courage to speak up. She spent her spring vacation after middle school graduation going to the library to check if he was sitting in the reading area.. The boy was always wearing the same black uniform from head to toe, matching the size of his body exactly.

The first time she talked to him was her first year of high school. After the entrance ceremony, she stopped by the Thorn Building and the boy was already there

reading with his chin resting on his hand. She sat down in a random seat and observed him. He was in the middle of reading and wasn't showing the slightest bit of emotion on his face. He flipped the pages at a fixed speed like a machine. When she checked it using the clock on the wall, she found that he was turning the pages one second apart each with absolutely no discrepancy. He looked more like he was burning the pages into his memory than actually reading.

When she stopped observing the boy and picked and opened children's book she'd been reading, it happened. Chiho noticed a piece of paper on the floor near her feet. She picked it up and there was small writing printed on both sides of the yellowed paper. It seemed like the page of a book.

'Um, I think this fell out from somewhere.'

She brought the page she picked up to the counter. There were two woman librarians there that attended to her.

'What book do you think it's from?'

'I dunno...'

The only information contained on the page she'd picked up was the text on the page and the page number of the book it belonged to; nothing about the title. She tried reading the text that was in the book but it wasn't anything that Chiho recognized. It seemed like it would be quite a challenge to return the page to its original book. You would have to look through every book on every shelf in the library and see if there was a page that had fallen out of any of them. Both she and the librarians were stumped, but then she heard a voice calling out from behind her.

'Could I see it?'

The boy was standing right behind her without her noticing. She was startled, and the boy clad in black outstretched his long thin arm. His arm passed by her cheek and it smelled like old books. He plucked the paper from the librarian that was holding it and looked down at it with a quiet expression. Those eyes were sharp and cold. They looked to her like they didn't have the tiniest amount of warmth in them. After staring at it for a short time, he said, 'Please wait here.' and walked off with the page. Chiho stayed there with the librarians. Without a moment of indecision, the boy walked up to one of the countless bookshelves, took out one book, and came back.

'I think it fell out of this book.'

Without even flipping through it, he placed the book on the counter. It was a book by an author called Unno Jyuuza. The two librarians looked at each other and checked inside. And sure enough, it was the book that the page had fallen out from. Putting the found paper in place, the hue, type face, and the connection to the text before and after it all matched exactly. Just as the boy had said, it was the correct book. Chiho and the librarians were both quite surprised, and before she knew it the boy was no longer next to them. He had promptly left the counter and as walking in the entranceway lobby.

She thought that if she missed this chance, she'd never get another one. And without realizing it she her legs had started moving and she broke into a run.

The long, thin wooden boards that made up the lobby floor really gave you a sense of the era when the Thorn Building was built. The floorboards were black and well-polished, and with the light coming in from the window they glistened like they were wet.

'Please, hold on!'

With the vaulted ceiling rising up three floors, the echo of Chiho's voice carried quite well. The boy stopped walking on the side of the spiral staircase.

'How did you know which book it was just then?'

The boy was much taller than Chiho. His behavior indicated he was debating whether or not to answer. Seeing his face up close, it strengthened her feeling that he was the boy from the incident.

'Because I remembered how the letters were arranged.'

The boy's voice was empty of emotion, like something inorganic.

'You mean you read it?'

'I don't know what the contents of that book was *as a novel*. I just memorized the printing on the pages. I remembered the appearance of the written words, it's not the same as reading it and understanding it.'

'You memorized the pages?'

'I've memorized almost all the books in this library.'

It didn't seem like he was fooling around and trying to make her laugh, nor did the boy smile.

'You sure have a good memory...'

'Not as good as it used to be. Nowadays, my limit is one book a day.'

'For me, sometimes I don't realize that I've read a book before and I end up reading it a second time.'

The boy made a 'so what' sort of face and said nothing. Chiho gave up on small talk.

'...Um, I have a question. Haven't we met before? Like about four years ago on October 21st?'

That was the day when she ran away from home, got picked on by a delinquent, and was saved by a boy. For a few seconds, he stared at Chiho, saying nothing.

'I don't remember,' he said, shaking his head.

'You have such a good memory, but you don't remember that?'

'Well, I only said I don't remember because it'd be annoying to go into detail. Let me revise that. That day, I know for a fact that I didn't meet you. Four years ago was 1995. That year, October 21st was a Saturday and I was at school all morning. And in the afternoon I went home to the orpha...'

'The what?'

'To my house. And after I got home I slept for a long time. At night I thought I'd do some stargazing, so I took a break. You probably don't remember, but that day in 1995, the Orionid meteor shower was visible in the night sky.'

'But you took out a knife and saved me, didn't you?'

'Knife? I think you've got me mixed up with someone else. I had nothing in my head but the meteor shower that night. Light was crossing the night sky. Faster than a bird. Faster than a horse. It was a sight that looked like it was the end of the world. You think with a night like that to see, I was spending my time saving you from something?'

The boy's name was Hasumi Takuma. He was 17 years old. He was one year older than she, so she called him Hasumi-senpai. At first, they only said hi to each other in the library but eventually they even said hi to each other in the school hallways. Sometimes she was worried that he thought she was annoying, but at some point he stopped keeping a distance from her and they became proper acquaintances.

Because of the cold, sharp eyes he had, no matter how delicious the doughnuts she bought were or how ridiculous a funny story she told, he never broke his cold expression. Maybe he just had trouble conveying emotion? Whether it was hot or cold out, it never seemed to affect him. In the summertime, he didn't wear a bathing suit; he would just wear his usual long-sleeved school uniform buttoned up to his neck with his hands through the sleeves. Even in the time of season when the cicadas were buzzing, when they went to a family restaurant and Chiho was exhausted from the heat, he sat in the seat across from her without a bead of sweat, looking out the window.

'What're you looking at?'

'I'm observing the license plates of the cars coming and going on the street, he replied, not turning around.

'What for...?'

'If I'm going to remember it anyhow, it had might as well be something that serves a purpose. Like at what hour and what minute, which cars owned by which people were on the road.'

Once in a while Hasumi-senpai spoke and behaved oddly like this. She wasn't sure how much of it was serious.

'Anyhow, aren't you hot? Why don't you take off your uniform?'

'I can't do that. My uniform has already fused with my body.'

Hasumi-senpai was always in that black school uniform, so you could call that jacket a symbol he'd composed for himself. The color of his hair was somewhat light, but his eyes and shoes were pitch black so it felt like the area he occupied was outer space. The accessories he had on one ear and the gold buttons down the center of his jacket looked like shining stars among the darkness and he always had a fountain pen stuck in his chest pocket. He said it was a present he's gotten from an old friend. But

there was no way his clothes had fused with his body. He had a body and that uniform just covered the surface of it.

By summer, it wouldn't be exaggerating to say they had were good friends that hung out together. But still, there were tons of things about him she didn't know. Whether or not he was really the boy who had protected her from a delinquent in elementary school remained a mystery to her.

She tried talking about it over the phone with her friend with braided hair that had started going to an all-girls school in S City.

'He says it wasn't him, but I think he might just be lying or something.'

Apparently once she had started going to high school, her friend with braided hair didn't have braided hair anymore. And what she said in response sounded like an admonition.

'Don't you think maybe you just *want* to believe that, Chiho?'

That could be true, she thought. With her general forgetfulness, how long could she accurately remember the face of the boy from back then? Thinking it over again, she felt like it was hard to tie that boy brandishing a knife with her senpai who was always staring at books. But somewhere deep down she still hoped they were the same person.

Maybe she wanted to feel like she was part of a story. Or she was hoping for some proof that he and she had some kind of special relationship. Like if there was a story as a backdrop, it would be easier for her to have confidence in those feelings.

From the other end of the phone line came a kind voice from her friend.

'But this is good, isn't it? I'll take care of the drink bar club alone. And if you get dumped, you can come back.'

She was concerned about her friendly relationship with Hasumi-senpai at school, but there weren't any female students she was particularly close friends there with. He seemed to always be absent from phys-ed. He said it was because of illness but she imagined it was just because he didn't want to take off his jacket. There were several places outside of school that Hasumi-senpai visited frequently. Bookstores, used book stores, stationary shops, libraries, and a certain house in the Eastern Morioh rural area.

That house was a compact run-down house in an area left out of the redevelopment project. That area was the same as it had been since long ago; private houses and rice fields as far as the eye could see. He didn't go to that run-down house with any particular goal. When he got near it, he strayed a little off the path and would just go sniff the air. There were weeds growing from the gaps between the roof tiles; nothing particularly eye-catching. It had long since fallen into disrepair, but there were still the remains of a home garden there. It looked like there were once onions and napa cabbage growing there. There was a hoe or sickle leaning up against the entranceway with a handle that was white with dried mud. The smell of rich soil was all around, and surprisingly it didn't smell bad at all.

When he first gave her a tour, she thought Senpai had used to live in the house a long time ago, but it turned out that wasn't the case.

'I've never lived here. Ever.'

'Then whose house is it?

'Until five years ago, an old couple lived there.'

'Where are they now?'

'They're both dead. First the wife died of illness. And half a year later, like he was following her, the husband died of a cerebral apoplexy.'

'So I guess they didn't have any children.'

'They had one daughter. She disappeared around 12 years ago. She never came back. She just suddenly disappeared one day into thin air. It's a common story, especially for Morioh. Did you know this town has a lot of cases of missing people? There's statistical data that shows it. Since the beginning of 1999, there've been 81 missing people. And 45 of those people were young boys or girls. I think of it kind of like Morioh itself is eating people in the shadows of the buildings with a number like that.'

Senpai looked into the house. The windows had fallen out so you could see in from the outside. The inside was pitch black, like looking into a deep cave.

'So, what kind of relationship did the people who lived here have with you, Senpai? Were they your relatives?'

'They were just slight acquaintances. We waited at the same bus stop a number of times, so we knew each other by sight. Anyway, Chiho, are you hungry? Let's go get some of those things. The deep fried things with the holes in the middle you like. The ones sprinkled with sugar, you know.'

Apparently he was talking about the doughnuts Chiho was always buying and eating.

'Also, I don't have any relatives. I don't have a family at all,' said Senpai as they walked toward the bus station.

Another day, too worried over the whole thing, she investigated the old couple living in that house without telling Senpai. She looked at old maps in the library, asked people who lived nearby, and searched through articles about cases of missing persons in old magazines. It was just as her senpai had said; an elderly couple that had both died. And the part about the missing daughter was true, too. They were a farm family that had lived in Morioh going way back, and apparently had the last name 'Hirai'. The girl who disappeared was named 'Akari'. And at the end of July of 1981, at the age of 21, she had simply disappeared from the town of Morioh.

---5---

A baby wrapped in a towel was discovered on the grounds of a temple on June 10th 1982. The head priest contacted the town's child welfare services, and within the day the child was moved to a home for infants.

The director of the home thought of a name for the baby. The home was located in Hasumichi Ward, so he gave the child the family name Hasumi. And there was a horse-shaped birthmark on the boy's right shoulder, so he gave him the first name Takuma. [TL Note: The name 'Takuma' is made up of the kanjis for 'polish' or 'cultivate' (琢) and 'horse' (馬)]

Hasumi Takuma stayed at the home for infants until he was one year old. After that, he was moved to an orphanage. At the orphanage, the staff made meals and washed clothes for the children. Around 15 children lived there with various reasons for being left there. Like their parents were serving prison sentences or they were so poor they couldn't care for them anymore. Though there weren't many children like Takuma who never even knew who their parents were.

When Takuma was five years old, a small three-year-old boy entered the orphanage. The reason he was put into the orphanage's care was because his stepfather had been abusing him. Come nightfall, the boy would always cry. Because of that, he was given the nickname Crybaby Boy. The staff had decided that all children below elementary school age were to sleep on futons in one large room and because the sound of Crybaby Boy's crying never stopped, the other children could never get any sleep. Some kids even started to get mad and hit him with pillows. One night, Takuma sat next to Crybaby Boy and talked to him.

'Why are you always crying?'

Crybaby Boy didn't answer, he just laid there sobbing. Takuma hugged the boy's head and spotted a horrible bruise on his back going down from his collar. The boy used his sleeve to wipe his face that was dirtied with ears and snot.

'Oh well. I'll tell you some neat stories, okay? So don't cry anymore.'

And like he was putting the boy to bed, while patting the boy's back, he told him the stories of 'Jack and the Beanstalk' and "'The Blue Bird of Happiness'. They were fairy tales that the adults working at the orphanage had read to him. Takuma was so good at reading the stories aloud that Crybaby Boy became so enthusiastic he even forgot to cry and fell asleep in a good mood.

Every night since then, Takuma told Crybaby Boy different stories. Somewhere along the line, other children started to come closer so they could hear better. Come nightfall at the orphanage's dormitory room, children would be gathered around Takuma. They would huddle together in the dark, with their eyes lighting up with excitement over what story they would be hearing tonight.

The staff noticed the talking late at night, and listened into what was going on in the room from outside. They were surprised at what they heard from Takuma. He was

able to tell an entire story they had read to him word for word from beginning to end. Checking the books, they confirmed just how accurate he was. Without a single omission, he had perfectly memorized it.

'How did you learn those stories so well?' an adult asked Takuma one day.

'Nothing special. I just remember the stories. All of them. And everything I've eaten before, I remember all of that, too.'

Could there really be someone in this world who remembered how many breads they'd eaten in their lives? Takuma had memorized it exactly. He could answer as to what he ate every time they went out for a meal. Every meal from when he's gotten off baby food to his current age of 5.

The adults at the orphanage took out some playing cards, shuffled them, and laid them out on the table.

'Now, why don't you try guessing where each card is?'

After Takuma had only seen the 52 cards for ten seconds, they turned them all face-down as a test for Takuma's memory.

'Okay then, try and guess which cards have which symbol and which number on them.'

Takuma pointed to the face-down cards, and correctly spoke their values one after another. The worker flipping them face-up couldn't even keep up. The adults were astounded and murmured to each other.

'This boy might be a genius.'

He was brought by car to a research lab of a hospital and college. At the research lab, he had a strange hat put on his head and had his brainwaves measured. He was made to memorize tens of thousands of lines of numbers and when he told them the answers to what they asked, the adults were happy.

On his way home from the examination, he was allowed to eat ice cream from the café in front of the train station. The café had an open terrace that had chairs and tables laid out outside. The people from the orphanage would always sit in the seats outside with a great view. As they ate their ice cream, lots of middle and high school kids on their way home passed in front of them. Students that used the train or the bus would always go through the station and kids coming back from playing somewhere would stop at the shops in front of the station. It was a real spectacle of throngs of people in black uniforms walking all over the place.

They had gone to the café to relax a few dozen times when it occurred. He realized among the throngs of middle and high schoolers, there wasn't a single 'new face'. He told this to the adults from the orphanage.

'So you're saying you recognize all of the students passing by?'

An adult from the orphanage turned to look at everyone passing by and gave a disbelieving expression.

'You must have seen every one of their faces by now. You've got every last one of them stored in your memory; the appearance of every student in this town who wears a uniform.'

Afterwards when collecting data, they checked up on how many people were enrolled in the school compared to the number of people he remembered. The numbers matched exactly. Just as the people from the orphanage had said, Takuma had memorized the faces of every one of the students.

Takuma was able to memorize literally everything. If he saw something just once, like a photo or a video, he could project it onto the screen that was the back of his eyelids as much as he wanted. It wasn't filtered by his emotions and never degraded; retaining every corner of his field of vision. He even remembered the expression on the faces of people he saw walking by. What he heard with his ears, even if it was some idle gossip he knew nothing about or had no interest in, he recorded it like a tape. He even remembered light seasonings on every piece of food he ever ate. In addition to his senses of sight, smell, hearing, and touch, there was one more kind of information he could remember: his own thoughts. Whether it was what he thought a few days ago when looking at clouds, or how he felt years ago when a friend had pinched him, or how his heart was moving at minute of any hour of any year, he remembered it.

However, he wasn't a genius. Takuma could not combine the information he had taken in to form ideas with new value or find the answers to questions he did not already know. Takuma's mind wasn't so much like a computer processor that could do high-speed operations as it was like a hard disk that he stored information on. It continuously absorbed and stored, like an enormous warehouse the size of the cosmos that he carried inside his head. Upon learning this, the college professors and doctors that were hoping for him to be a genius seemed somewhat disappointed. He would remember those sorts of expressions of those around him, down to the smallest details, forever.

In his first year of elementary school, there was an incident. On his way home from school, Takuma witnessed a purse-snatching. Right before his eyes, someone driving a moped came up from behind an old lady as she was walking and hooked her bag on his arm when he drove past her, carrying it off with him. Three days after the incident occurred, the culprit had still not been caught. He had heard that the bag contained money the woman needed to cover her living expenses. Wanting to help her if he could, Takuma replayed the moment of the incident in his head.

He knew 24 sparrows were flying in the sky, that the tires of the culprit's moped had kicked up a pebble, and exactly how many seconds the old lady had screamed for. But the purse-snatcher was wearing a helmet, so he didn't know his face. What's more, his license plate was covered in packing tape, so it was hard for him to identify it.

Down to the utmost details, the vivid memories of what he saw, what he heard, the feeling of the air on his skin, his heart swelling up in surprise, he immersed his consciousness in a mix of all of those together, and it was as if he had returned to that moment in time. A world different from the one he was living in in the present unfolded in his head. A world no different from reality. After hearing the old woman scream more than 30 times in his head, he finally found a clue to identifying the culprit.

The moment the culprit swiped the bag, the moped tilted slightly, and the light of the sun reflected off of the side of its frame. Some small indentations on the right side that you wouldn't be able to see without a good look stood out in the light. It was a unique scratch shaped like a lightning bolt..

He told this to the staff at the orphanage and though the police only half believed him, they put out a search for a moped with the scratch Takuma described. Before long, the culprit was captured. But since then, Takuma's memory power was never again used for good.

In his second year of elementary school, Takuma was in a traffic accident.

It was caused by him walking while remembering the classical piece he had heard during music time. He was able to replay the entire performance of his teacher playing on the piano from beginning to end in his head. It was a Mozart piece the teacher had been playing that day. He had a feeling he'd heard it somewhere before, but didn't know where. And Takuma had never felt the sensation of not being able to remember something before. While Takuma was putting on his shoes, turning at a street corner, and when he started crossing the street, he was replaying his teacher playing the piano in his head.

When he snapped back to reality, a car was closing on him from the right. He was lucky enough to not lose his life, but he was in a state of unconsciousness for several days after. Perhaps because at that time Takuma was shorter than the other kids, the bumper left a mark at the high location of the base of his femur.

In his long stay at the hospital, confined to his bed, he replayed in his head TV anime he'd seen in the past. He had vividly recorded every line, every image that changed on the screen, for every episode. While he drank liquid food, the taste of curry he had eaten at the orphanage awoke in his head. While he was vividly reproducing that taste in his head, it made the bland liquid food tasted like wonderfully flavorful curry.

But there was a down side to his predisposition for accumulating more and more information into his brain simply by living his life. The simple act of *forgetting*, something perfectly natural to any other human, was not possible for Takuma to do. No matter how much time passed, it made no difference. As he aged, the amount of information he'd accumulated kept increasing until it became more than he could deal with.

One night in his hospital room when he couldn't sleep, he called up memories of when he had been together with his friends in the orphanage. The times when he'd

played shiritori with everyone or played sugoroku with them reawakened in his head. When that happened, he wasn't in a hospital room: he felt like he was truly playing with his friends at that moment. Suddenly, a fly passed across his field of vision, landing on a wall. Takuma rolled up a magazine that was next to him and squashed the fly. The fly was crushed completely, and at that moment he remembered a certain summer day. [TL Note: Shiritori is a word game and sugoroku is a board game similar to backgammon.]

That day, Takuma was running around a park with everyone and he accidentally stepped on a rhinoceros beetle. It was the one that he had brought to show off to the neighborhood kids. The sun beat down relentlessly. His skin, his head, his hair, were all extremely hot. On the underside of his shoe he was crushing an insect shell and he felt the squishing sensation of the soft insides. When he checked the bottom of his shoe, the still-living squirming rhinoceros beetle was stuck to it.

The moment he recalled it, he felt bad. The sensation he'd felt at that time vividly replayed in his head. The heat, the smell of the soil, the sweat... But it didn't happen by his own volition. He didn't want to remember it, but that memory resurrected itself on its own. The crushed fly left a stain on the wall, and fell to the ground. And sure enough, this became the trigger for him recalling another similar scene from his past.

The same sorts of events continued even after he left the hospital, and with greater frequency. His mind that knew nothing of forgetting became like a snowy mountain whose snow never melted. As he got older, his past would pile up higher and with it, the weight would balloon uncontrollably until the point where with any small outside stimulus could start an avalanche. Normally, things would be forgotten. He would no longer be able to remember unpleasant experiences, but they kept appearing before his eyes with astounding clarity.

Images of dead dogs and cats with their guts spilled out on the side of the road and the smells they gave off hanging in the air would resurrect themselves while he was eating. The fear he had felt when he was locked in a dark place would suddenly swell up in his chest and make him want to scream. He would be attacked by the sensation of his own bones creaking and breaking from when he was in a traffic accident.

An orphanage staff member he had trusted had gotten emotional and beaten a child. After seeing the look on their face once, he was no longer able to talk to that adult again. He would remember when he was betrayed by his friends or when he betrayed them. He remembered when he envied someone or wished they would fail. The looks people gave him and the words they said to him would never disappear, always spinning around the back of his cranium. No matter how bad the experience, they would never fade into the past. His mind would be wandering absentmindedly when suddenly a memory would replay anew, flooding his consciousness with the flow of a different time and place, confusing him until he wouldn't even know where he was.

He could no longer look someone in the eyes and talk to them, and more kids started to pick on him at school. He heard giggling directed towards him in the classroom. Adults that found Takuma's memory power creepy were desperately trying to hide their frightened expressions. Around the time he turned 10, he didn't want to look at or listen to anything anymore. Takuma locked himself inside a room of the orphanage and cut off all interaction with his friends. In the plaza outside his window he saw a slide, a swing, and old worn out clock that was pretty much a wreck.

Without taking a step outside his room, even blocking his ears and eyes with a futon, thoughts would accumulate in his head in the form of memories. With his conscious thoughts as the key, memories of his past experiences were awakened. At that time, what attacked Takuma were mostly painful memories that he didn't want to remember at all. They were like a nightmare he had while being wide awake. When he felt disturbed or upset, the resurrected memories would make him lose his grip on his internal temporal axis, randomly sending him into a realm with no laws of cause and effect. Fragments of memories that had left an impression on him were extracted and appeared in his mind whenever they wanted. The rhinoceros beetle's innards, the adult beating a child, heavy breathing, and the sound of his bones breaking; it was a jumble of several years of memories mixed up in his head.

The adults seemed unable to decide how they should interact with Takuma. They brought Takuma meals and occasionally came in to clean. One day, an adult noticed red marks on Takuma's arms and put some medicine on them. There were several red lines on the inner sides of his arms going from his elbows up to near his wrists. It seems that in order to endure the collapse of memories, he was unconsciously scratching them with his nails.

One Sunday afternoon, Takuma took a pair of scissors and pierced the blood vessels in his arms. He was trying to kill himself. A large amount of blood flooded out and spread out around him. He felt tranquil, like the pain was finally going to go away. But when he awoke from his comatose state, he was in a hospital.

Even in the hospital, he tried to kill himself. He jumped out the third-story window. He didn't faint, but he fell into some shrubs and injured his face and neck. The branches punctured the blood vessels in his neck, and a large amount of blood burst out of him like from a fountain. He also broke some ribs, changing the shape of the shape of the outline of his body. Looking back on it later, he concluded that a hospital wasn't a good place to try to commit suicide. Due to the emergency treatment by the doctors and nurses, his life was spared.

After that, he was no longer allowed to leave his room and the staff made sure not to leave any sharp objects inside it that could be used to commit suicide. Takuma had fits and left the doctors and nurses with bruises. As long as he remained alive, the amount of information in his head from his life experiences would only increase, and someday, undoubtedly, would make it explode. He pulled out his hair and bit his lips; he

was at his limit of what he could endure. It was as if he could hear the creaking of his skull being pushed out from the inside by the force of his expanding brain. He was bombarded by a tangled, confused flood of memories in his head both day and night. Eventually, the doctors and nurses started to have looks on their faces like they had abandoned him.

'I feel so bad for the boy. Please, help him. He doesn't even know his parent's faces.'

One day he heard the voice of an orphanage worker coming from the hallway. It sounded like they were having a conversation with a doctor or a nurse. Takuma drank his medicine, and let his thoughts wander absent-mindedly. Now that he thought of it, he did have his own father and mother, didn't he? Up until that point, he just thought he'd spontaneously manifested from thin air and fallen to the ground. But after considering it, just like everyone else, he was someone's child.

A tear dripped down Takuma's face. And at that moment, he suddenly noticed something.

Out of nowhere, a book had appeared next to his pillow.

It was a hard covered tankoubon-size book. The cover was dark brown and made of leather. And for some reason, it was covered in scratches, large and small, that looked like they had been cut by a knife. It was painful to look at. He didn't know who had put it next to his pillow. He was sure it wasn't there a minute ago and that no one had come into the hospital room.

When he tried to pick it up, he felt the cover with his fingertips. He realized that the book was warm, like human skin. When he felt the book in the palm of his hand, he could feel a sensation of slow breathing, of a chest moving up and down, from the leather cover. It had a soft, soothing feel to it. Like it was sticking to his palm. He imagined that this might be what it would feel like if you made a book cover using human skin.

There was no title printed on it, nor did he see any author name. And bizarrely, he felt like he'd always known about the existence of this book. But searching through his memories from the past few years, he didn't find that a dark brown cover like this had ever entered his field of vision. [TL Note: He's describing this book, the one you're reading. Except without the title/author. A tankoubon is a name for a manga volume/book of a certain size, typically about 13cm by 18cm.]

When he was about to open the book, a nurse came into the hospital room and started replacing the bandages on his arm. The nurse was surprised by how calm Takuma was. After applying the new bandages, the nurse left the room, and Takuma tried to read the book again. But even looking under the bed and between the sheets, he couldn't find the book he's just had anywhere.

The appearance of the leather-bound book coincided with Takuma's recovery. He didn't know why. But ever since then, unpleasant memories stopped reappearing in

his mind on their own. Takuma was released from the hospital and returned to his previous life at the orphanage.

The second time he saw the leather-bound book was on the night he returned to the orphanage. Even though he had been released from the hospital, he was given a single bedroom to avoid further problems. When he was trying to fall asleep on his futon in the middle of the night, various different memories from the past reemerged in his head just as they had before. Information fluttered about the inside of his skull into a confused jumble. When he was about to dig his nails into the backs of his arms, there was a 'thump' sound, like something had fallen onto the floor.

He got up from the futon to see what it was, and the leather-bound book had fallen there.

It didn't seem like anyone had opened up the door and thrown it in. It seemed to him like it could only have appeared out of thin air.

Though it had looked all beaten up in the hospital, the book he now saw had barely any scratches on it. And where it did have scratches, all that were left were shallow lines. But it wasn't a different book. For some reason, he was sure it was the same one he had seen in the hospital room. And that it was just like his own body. When Takuma was in the hospital he'd had a lot of injuries, but now all he had left were scars.

He opened the book up and gazed at it. It seemed thick enough to have about 380 pages, and had a weight appropriate to that when he held it in his hand. Just like an ordinary book, it was composed so you read it starting from the right. When opening the cover his hand felt so used to, he saw several pages which were blank white, and after that, the pages had vertically written Japanese text. [TL Note: If it's not immediately obvious, all those things describe this novel as well.]

Using all kinds prose and metaphors, dark descriptions were chronicled endlessly throughout the pages. Each page was packed with small black characters, like a colony of ants. Looking closely, those ants started to wriggle, and he felt like his consciousness would fall into the pages of sprawling dark descriptions. The darkness became more intense to the point where it even felt to him like it had physical mass, and that's where Takuma stopped reading. It had seemed to be a novel, but the author seemed like they had something wrong with them.

He was scared. He felt like he needed to throw the book as far away from himself as he could. He left the orphanage in the middle of the night, and threw the book off the top of a bridge. He made sure it had sunk into the river, leaving only foam and bubbles behind. But when he awoke the next morning, the book was there on his futon. On his way to his elementary school, he tossed the book from off the top of a pedestrian overpass onto the back of a truck. He made sure to watch it as the dark brown book was carried off into the distance. But when he opened the drawer to his desk in the classroom, the book was already inside, waiting for him. Left with no other choice, he

decided to just live his life and ignore the book. But wherever he went, the book appeared. In the hospital examining room, it was on the doctor's desk. When he went to his elementary school's library room, it was in line with the books in the new book corner. And bizarrely, it seemed that book was invisible to everyone but himself. As he was the only one who even knew it existed, if he dropped the leather-bound book on the floor, everyone - whether it be his teachers, his classmates, or the orphanage staff - would all pass right by it.

It was like the book was a hallucination only he was seeing.. It was only for him that that book had mass and could be touched. When he got his nose close to it, he even smelled the scent of an old book. But were all five of his senses just hallucinating?

One day, Takuma took to observing the book in one of the rooms in the orphanage. He put it on a desk and on the side of it opposite the window was the book's shadow. When he shook the desk, the book shook with it. When he pushed on the book with his fingers, his fingers turned white like they would when pushing on something hard. When he tried tapping it with a pencil, it made a soft pah-pah sound.

He tried dropping a pencil on top of the book. The pencil rested on top of the leather cover and stayed that way. If it were an illusion, the pencil should just go right through the book and roll away. He was scared, but he plucked up his courage and opened the cover once again. The beginning was all made up of dark descriptions, so he started to feel down. But this time he tried skipping to about page 50. He tried reading a few lines, and it was just as eerie as he'd expected. The sentences written in the book were like a novel written in the first person, but it was all things he remembered.

...One night, I sat next to Crybaby Boy and talked to him.

'Why are you always crying?'

Crybaby Boy didn't answer, he just laid there sobbing. I hugged the boy's head and spotted a horrible bruise on his back going down from his collar. The boy used his sleeve to wipe his face that was dirtied with tears and snot.

'Oh well. I'll tell you some neat stories, okay? So don't cry anymore.'...

As he gazed at the words printed on the page, that scenery, those smells, that atmosphere: everything resurrected inside his head. It was his own life experiences turned into word-form. They were simple sentences, so he could smoothly read through them in a flash. And yet, for some reason, he had the delusion of feeling like he was really there. The name 'Takuma' was written all over the pages. In places where some third party addressed the first-person character, that was the name that was written. As he turned the pages and read other scenes, Takuma became sure.

The sentences written in the book were his own memories composed in the form of a first-person novel. The past he had experienced has been converted into words and collected into a single book.

---6---

Kishibe Rohan took a match and struck it across a surface to light it, illuminating his face in red. He lit his foreign-made antique stove, adjusted the knobs, and sat back down in his chair. The chair looked comfortable. I guess mangaka spend a lot of their time sitting, so they don't skimp when it comes to chairs for their studio. It was January 6th 2000, the last day of winter vacation, and I was visiting Kishibe Rohan's house. Two days had passed since it had happened. And I had calmed down just enough to be able to eat a hamburger steak. With his collection of photos as reference for manga arranged on one wall in his studio, Kishibe Rohan was at his desk, facing a blank manuscript paper. Concerned, I asked him a question.

'Um, if I'm bothering you, I can come back later.'

'I'll be done in another three pages. It'll only take 5 minutes, so just wait there.'

Without even drawing an under-sketch, he took a pen dipped in ink and started moving at breakneck speed. As if using a copy machine on the images he had in his mind, a world sprawled out on the formerly white paper in the blink of an eye. I just sat there, not saying a word. Before long, he plopped the completed bundle of manuscript pages on his desk. When I checked my watch, I found that he had finished three manuscript pages in three minutes. It was an unreal pace. Kishibe Rohan turned towards me, still in his chair.

'That was a real help, your taking credit as the first discoverer of the incident the other day. That kept me from getting mixed up in something really complicated.'

After I had phoned the police about Orikasa Hanae, I was brought into the police station for questioning. They even called my parents; it was a real ordeal.

'Your family must have been surprised, too.'

'I think they were worried I'd be traumatized by it. By the way, I came here today because I had something I wanted to ask you about that incident.'

Just as I was about to start into it, Rohan started nodding and making a face like he already knew the question I was going to ask.

'You're concerned about the rumor right? The one about the cause of Orikasa Hanae's death?'

Even the newspapers had labeled the event of a woman named Orikasa Hanae dying in her room as a mysterious death. But there really weren't much of any follow up reports giving more details. There were just some weird rumors spreading around about her death.

'They said Orikasa Hanae lived alone, right? She had no family or close friends, nor anyone in the neighborhood she frequently associated with. She apparently lived a quiet life alone with one cat. They also said that she had relatively high-class furniture and that there were no signs she had to be careful with money. Her main hobby was reading. It seemed she liked mystery novels more than anything else. Speaking of which, about the cause of death you're concerned about...'

'Had you already realized it on the day it happened? Actually, more importantly, do you think it's *true* in the first place?'

'Someone performing the investigation must have accidentally told a friend or family member about it. I can't get over how inexplicable it is. It's a bizarre situation. Something that shouldn't be possible to occur inside a closed-in house apparently happened. Even if it happened outside the house, it might still be impossible. But her corpse was found sprawled out in the living room. Do you remember? There was a mark on Orikasa Hanae's right femur. Her skirt was flipped up so it caught my eye. You know those tools they use for drawing white lines on playing fields, right? It was like one of those crossed over her on the ground, forming a distinct line-shaped mark on her. I was wondering about it, so I managed to obtain an autopsy report, and that mark only exists on her right femur. There wasn't one on the left femur.'

The flames on the stove gave off a red light. Kishibe Rohan continued talking in an indifferent tone. I placed my fingers that had gone cold and pale over the flame of the stove.

'So when you saw the shape of the mark, that's when you imagined what you thought had happened to her, right?'

'That's because I've seen it before in photos I've used as reference for manga. That mark she had, she got from being hit by the bumper of a car. In other words, she was in a traffic accident. *Inside her house*. The fact that she's got that mark on her right femur is proof that she got hit by a car on the right-hand side, since that's the only situation in which her left thigh wouldn't have a bumper mark as well.'

If I hadn't heard the rumors going around the town beforehand, I doubt I could've been able to believe his story so easily. Everyone from kids I'd passed by in the bookstore to middle schoolers in the video shop came up to me to talk to me about the rumors. Apparently there was a woman who was hit by a car and killed indoors. But was that even possible?

'Do you think she could've just happened to have been hit by a car outside, went back inside her house, and then died?'

'With those injuries, I doubt she could even crawl. Having said that, she did not show any sign of being transported by someone else, either. If she *had* been moved by someone else's hands, the area around her house would've had at least some bloodstains.'

'Maybe it was cleaned, or gotten rid of somehow...'

'Even if that were the case, it couldn't then have been locked. Did they make a spare key and lock them after they left? Or perhaps the other person was hiding out in her house? What reason could they have for doing any of those things? There's a lot of questions that still need answers. But the fact that she was struck by a car is a certainty. And it's not just the bumper mark that indicates that. The wounds on her body appeared to be made from the broken glass from hitting a windshield.'

'If it really was a traffic accident, then that means a car had to have smashed into her living room. And if that happened, her furniture would be all messed up. But the sofa, TV and stuff were all perfectly neat and orderly. Was there any glass scattered around that house? If it's possible for a person to die via a traffic accident indoors, then she was never really safe wherever she was...'

The fact that an inexplicable death occurred nearby had my family scared. Especially my big sister who's always been bad with urban legends, ghost stories, and that sort of thing. Recently, even when she's inside, she jumps when she hears the sound of a car outside.

'There's a lot we don't know.'

Kishibe Rohan crossed his legs and opened a notebook. It seemed that notes about things he had investigated were written inside.

'I met with the doctor in charge of Orikasa Hanae's autopsy and secretly read his memories. He had learned quite a bit from the wounds left on her body. He had judged that directly after the collision, she was thrown upwards, landed on the hood, and broke the front windshield. Also, the vehicle that hit her wasn't a large-sized car like a truck, it was a perfectly ordinary passenger car. But there's just one point I just don't get. That is the location of the bumper mark. If she was hit by a passenger vehicle, the mark should've been a lot lower down on her leg than it was.'

'Lower?'

'The woman, Orikasa Hanae, was 169 centimeters tall according to the records. That's taller than the average height of a Japanese woman. It seems her weight was actually lower than average, so her build was tall and slim. The car hit her when she was standing upright. Normally, a car's bumper would have hit her near her knees and left a bruise *there*. If the driver of the car hit the brakes quickly enough, the height of the car should sink somewhat, making the height of the bruise even *lower*. But her bruise was at the base of her femur. No matter how you look at it, that's too much distance from the ground. A passenger vehicle can never leave a bumper mark at that height in any situation. Having said that, looking at the state of the wound, there isn't any way that the car that ran her over could have been the type with a high ride height. The only thing I can think of is that the car had to have been floating a few dozen centimeters off the ground.'

Things were making less and less sense. Was he really saying she was hit by a flying car? With a face like he had remembered something, Kishibe Rohan added this:

'By the way, apparently the cause of death was blood loss. Orikasa Hanae got her injuries in what seemed to be a traffic accident, and was just left there, unconscious. That shouldn't have happened. If someone had immediately called for an ambulance, she may have been saved.'

'About how long was she left there?'

'Based on the autopsy report, a whole day. I wonder what happened 24 hours before we got there. Who can say what it was, but 24 hours earlier, *something* happened to her which caused her to collapse and bleed out. Then the cat came by and rubbed up against her body or fell in the puddle of blood. That's why the cat was all bloody like that.'

Kishibe Rohan pointed towards the floor, where a white female cat was yawning in front of the stove. The cat Orikasa Hanae had kept while she was still alive. When I was investigating the house, I had brought her with me. She had a heart-shaped nameplate hanging from her collar. According to that, the cat's name was "Trinita."

Two days earlier that cat was sleeping in front of the Sun Mart and the police took charge of her because of a report by a store employee. I'd heard they removed the blood from her fur, cleaned her up, and were keeping her at the police station. I'd been called there for an interview yesterday and saw Trinita left in a box in the corner of the room.

'I just borrowed her from the police for a little while.'

'Did you perhaps take her without permission? I'm impressed you didn't get caught. Though I guess you used your Stand to do it.'

Trinita was licking her paws and arranging her fur. Now that the blood was gone, I could see how pretty that female cat's face and fur were.

It was actually pretty simple to take the cat out of the police station without anyone noticing. I could have done it without taking one step away from a vending machine 50 meters away and even buy some juice while doing it. I can do stuff like change the TV channel from far away without a remote control or get some candy from the kitchen while sprawled out on the couch. And that's not even my Stand's primary ability.

I'm sorry if this sounds sudden, but there are these guardian spirit sort of things that we possess. Normally they are silent and hidden so you can't see them. We call these things 'Stands'. The name comes from "stand by me," apparently.

Stands can be seen by other humans that have Stands, but not by normal humans. Based upon the master, they'll have different unique forms. For example, there are humanoid and animal-like Stands as well as ones that have the forms of inanimate objects. My Stand is has a lizard-like appearance. It appears by my will and can float around the nearby area. For example, it could covertly enter a police station a few dozen meters away and take a cat out of it, if I were so inclined. It basically works like a remote control.

'Rohan-sensei, do you know why I brought this cat here?'

'I am utterly shocked at what you've done. But I don't dislike it.'

'I want to calm my family down. I'd think that if we can figure out how that person was killed, it would also get rid of the anxiety they have, don't you think?'

'Perfect. Because I was thinking I'd like to investigate them as well. The cat's memories, I mean.'

It's possible the pet cat saw what was coming. If we could ascertain those memories, we could also learn the reason for Orikasa Hanae's death.

Sensing our intent, Trinita opened her eyes. Her vertical-slit pupils narrowed tightly and reflected the image of Kishibe Rohan approaching her. With a vigilant look on her face, Trinita turned around and tried to run away. But she suddenly fell down. Looking closely, I saw that her front paws that were on the ground were unraveling like thin papers. And that wasn't all. A seam opened on the skin between the short fur on her face. It was like she was split apart with a box cutter that was cutting along a ruler. Linear cuts opened along the sides of her face as well, but the cat had already fallen unconscious and had stopped moving. That is what the mysterious power of the Stand Kishibe Rohan possesses did.

'So it works on animals too, huh?'

'As long as it's an animal with intelligence. They become much simpler "books" than humans do, though. That's because their spirits aren't very complex.'

Trinita's body had opened and had become like the pages of a magazine. Kishibe Rohan's bent his slim figure forward and grasped the opened part of the cat with his fingertips and started flipping through it. The flat paper-like areas had text written on them and were laid out just like the pages of a magazine. Those were the cat's memories. Ever since she was born from her mother cat, a profile of the life she led up until then was written there. If we searched carefully, we should be able to find her memories of the day the incident occurred in text form.

'This cat's name is Trinita, without a doubt. And its owner is Orikasa Hanae. It seems its mother also belonged to her,' said Kishibe Rohan as he flipped through the cat's body. I moved my face close to it as well and tried to read some. 'My favorite hobby is to roll around balls of yarn.' was written there. Even though they were an animal's memories, they were written with Japanese characters. Recorded in the cat's body were the days she'd spent with Orikasa Hanae. Here and there were some words of affection towards the cat's owner. Before long, Kishibe Rohan found the memories of the moment Orikasa Hanae had died. They were in the form of a bulleted list of descriptions written inconspicuously on the inside of Trinita's chest.

- There is someone standing outside of the window.
- Human boy. School uniform.
- Master stood at the window and started talking.
- Boy took off his jacket and had a short-sleeved shirt on under it. There were lots of red scratch marks on both his arms.
- 'DOTAN, BATAN' the sound of hitting the floor.
- Master stopped moving.

There wasn't a single word written about Orikasa Hanae being hit or anything about flying cars. The cat didn't see a car, hear the sound of an engine, smell the gas from the exhaust, or anything like that, it seemed.

The flame on the stove flickered and our shadows on the floor grew. Kishibe Rohan gently closed the cat's body. The seam on it changed back to how it was before. Trinita opened her eyes and stood up. She gave the impression that she didn't know what had just happened to herself and let out a meow before moving away from Kishibe Rohan. I called out to the cat.

'I'll buy you some tasty fish sausages later, and I'll bring you to your master's house, too.'

'A School uniform must mean it was a middle school or high school student. I think that boy killed Orikasa Hanae. I don't know how, but he certainly has something to do with her death. He may have some special power, like us.'

That boy may be at the school I go to. Very close to me, there could be a person who can calmly hurt a person. And you could bet that person would have a normal face and pretend to be a normal person. Orikasa Hanae had been killed. I couldn't tell this to my mom or my big sister. If they knew someone like that was walking around, I can't even imagine what a shock it would be to them.

'Don't you think this boy might hurt someone else?'

I asked Kishibe Rohan. It had said that the boy had many red scratch-like scars on his arms. The white cat whose owner had been murdered had identified a unique characteristic trait. That should be a clue to finding the killer. Kishibe Rohan said this in a very deliberate voice.

'I can tell just by looking at your eyes what it is you're thinking. But I think it's best that we are cautious. If he's a Stand user then we still haven't the slightest idea what kind of ability he has.'

I walked over to the window. There were trees whose leaves had fallen off lined up across the housing district of Morioh. Cold air drifted in through the opening in the window. Even now, somewhere in this city, is the boy that killed Orikasa Hanae.



---7---

He had a feeling he was being watched, so Takuma turned to look behind the chair he was sitting on, but the only other person in the room was Futaba Chiho. Thinking it must have been his imagination, he went back to reading. The wooden chair close to the window would creak from moving his body just a little, making him think it might fall apart any second. It was probably left in a place like this so no one would sit on it.

For some time, Futaba Chiho had been coming and going to in front of a bookshelf. The third floor of the town library, the Thorn Building, had a structure that reminded him of an attic. The walls and ceiling went at oblique angles to conform to the shape of the roof. Because staff were rarely up there, there was a coating of dust over the floor and various antique items that had been left up there. There was iron grating on all of the windows from the first up to the third floor. They were there to block against intruders, but from this room they seemed like they could be an escape route. The grating was loose and looked like it was about to fall off and there was no sign that they would be repaired.

It was January 6th 2000, the last day of winter vacation.

'...I can't find it anywhere. Maybe it's checked out?'

Chiho approached him, shivering. There was no heater on this floor, and the air seeping in through the windows was cold.

'Maybe a book like that never existed in the first place.'

'It would've made an interesting story for a novel, though...'

She turned towards an old bookshelf.

The rumor that there was a bizarre book somewhere in the Morioh library started circulating sometime around last summer. It supposedly looked like a normal book at first glance, but it was printed full of nonsensical characters. It had sentences that looked like they were created by taking scraps of a document that had been shredded, then shuffled and put back together. But the most eerie thing about it was, apparently, sometimes a groaning voice would emanate from it. And you could hear the voice of a clerk that worked at the library or an old man that used to clean there muttering 'help me' to an empty building. With Chiho looking for ideas to write a novel about, she took an interest in the rumor and was searching for the book in question.

On the first floor of the Thorn Building they have their literature collection and the second floor is where they keep the science, technology, and philosophy books. If that book does exist, Chiho said it would probably be on the third floor. The third floor is supposedly where they kept the valuable, rare books and gifts to the library. But once they got permission to go in, the room looked like a storage room. There was a bunch of junk lying around: spider web-covered stuffed eagles, a faded, brown globe, and a map that had been holes eaten into it by bugs so you couldn't tell what town it was a map of.

There were also several old bookshelves filled with Western books, but we couldn't seem to find the book we were after.

'What have you been doing, Senpai?'

Chiho took some chocolate out of her bag, took off the wrapping, and tossed a piece into her mouth

'Reading. Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.'

'That's the one where candy makes him recall old memories, right? But where's the book?'

Chiho's gaze wandered around the area. It seemed that she could not see the leather-bound book in Takuma's hands. This book that he had obtained in elementary school could never be seen by other humans. It didn't have a title printed on the cover, so he wanted to give it some kind of name, but he'd yet to come up with one he liked. Takuma hadn't said anything about the book to her and pointed with his index finger to his head.

'I have every volume of it, word for word, inside my head.'

'Then I can't read it, I guess. Though I'm not exactly jealous. To read a book that's just in your memory seems so cold to me.'

'So you're the type that doesn't like not having the feel of the pages on your fingers and the weight of the book in your hands, huh? If there ever comes an age of electronic books, you'll get left behind, you know.'

'I wouldn't like that.'

'Mm. I wouldn't really mind, though.'

'But it's just data, isn't it? It's kinda creepy, like a ghost.'

'A ghost?'

'I mean it is, isn't it? Try thinking of a book like it's a person. The cover and pages are the flesh, and the actual contents are the heart. An electronic book is like a person with no body and just a soul.'

'As long as it's got the soul, who really cares about the rest?'

Chiho gave an astonished look and turned her head. She was in the first year of high school, his junior by one year. She had told him about her surprising hobby of writing. He thought it was a bit of a waste to be spending your precious teen years writing novels. He felt it was like throwing a jewel down a drain and that it would be better for her to give up on all that and spend more time having fun outside. If he were an author that had debuted in his teens, that's the advice he would've wanted to give her, but unfortunately that wasn't the case, so Takuma kept quiet.

He had read the novel she had written a little while earlier. It was a fantasy novel with a juvenile literature charm. When he put his honest opinion of it into words, she gave a pity-filled glance that said, 'You really have no taste for these sorts of things, Senpai.'

'Why don't we go downstairs? It's cold up here...' Chiho said, rubbing her arms.

'So you're giving up on that bizarre book?'

'I heard another rumor that I thought was interesting.'

They left the room and started down the hallway to the spiral staircase. This place had no elevator, so they had to use spiral staircase to move between floors. The wooden handrails gave off a glossy shine and they were lined with supports shaped like bowling pins. As they entered the atrium, they looked down over the handrail on the lobby with its black floorboards.

'Why do you need to hang around with me while you're looking for material to write your novel?'

'With you here, I can instantly find out which bookshelf has any book I might be looking for, right?'

When he first got to know her, she was more of a reserved girl. A half a year of time had brought about quite a big change on the nature of their relationship. Takuma wore his school uniform even over winter vacation, but she wasn't at all surprised by it anymore.

The first floor had a dignified design like an ancient ruin. There were two female staff members that were always stationed at the counter. He heard the heater running in the reading space. Chiho sat down at a table and stretched, looking relieved. Her sweater's sleeves fell back and he caught a glimpse of her white arms underneath. Her silky hair swayed a bit with the movement and he could see her nicely shaped ears. At Budougaoka High School, there were lots of students that had piercings or had patches stuck on their uniforms. Takuma had accessories on one ear as well. But Chiho didn't seem to be the kind of girl that would put that kind of thing on her body. Though Chiho always carried around a pressed four-leaf clover in a transparent bookmark. Even when the book she was reading changed, the clover bookmark always stayed the same.

'Earlier, I was on the phone with my friend who goes to an all-girls' school in S City and she told me about a weird story she heard from her senpai at her job.'

Chiho took out a hand-sized notebook from her bag. It had a green cover and didn't have any stickers or anything like that on it. It gave off the impression that she took great care whenever she used it.

'Is that the rumor you were talking about before you said you were interested in?'

She gave a small nod and turned her eyes up slightly towards Takuma. She had a look on her face like she was trying to surmise how much interest *he* had in it. Her irises had a brown hue that was lighter than most peoples', making the pupils in the centers stand out. She had the kind of cute looks that made you imagine that everyone in class must love her.

'Wanna hear more?'

She turned a page in her notebook with fingers that were red from the cold.

'So, these rumors are about a mysterious death... Have you heard about it? It's this bizarre incident that happened in Morioh two days ago.'

Takuma stayed silent and Chiho tilted her neck. Her hair shook, causing it to fall from her shoulder. Of course he knew. It was the incident where a woman's corpse had been found inside her house. Chiho glared at her notebook and furrowed her brow. She looked like she was having difficulty saying it.

'According to the rumors, that person's body...'

'Had wounds on it that looked like she was hit by a car, right?'

The victim was Orikasa Hanae. Age 39. She was found having bled to death in the living room of her own house. The house's windows and entrances were all locked, and no signs of anyone coming in or out were found. And in the autopsy she was judged to have been in a traffic accident.

'I heard that the furniture and her clothes were both completely unscathed and yet she had these big wounds like she'd been hit by a car. What do you think? If I used this as the basis for a book, genre-wise it would be romance-horror, right?'

'I really don't think you could hold a reader's attention using that idea for a whole book. But why do you want to investigate an incident like that, anyhow?'

In all of the novels of hers he'd read so far, none of them had death in them. They all had more of an idyllic, fantastic style. Her suggestion of using this incident as the subject for a novel surprised him.

'It's not a particularly deep situation. It's just that people's psyches get drawn in by the weird rumors. I feel like there should be some kinda story behind all that... I heard that the person who discovered the body is somebody in our school. A first year, Hirose Kouichi-san. And they say that he was the one that contacted the police.'

Chiho stopped talking about the mysterious death incident for a while, but then she asked him if he had any memory of reading about any similar incidents or bizarre events. She had used Takuma's enormous memory as a substitute for an encyclopedia like this many times before. He had tens of thousands of pages of every kind of encyclopedia crammed into his head, so he could usually give a positive answer. But for this incident, he shook his head. After a while, they noticed it was getting dark outside the windows and decided to head home. They left the Thorn Building and walked down the brick path that extended to the gate. The illumination lights were already on, lighting up the building. They exited through the iron gate with thorny vines entwining around it and then stopped by the bakery in the shopping district where Chiho bought some doughnuts. They looked like they were right out of the fryer, and when she bit into one, steam rose out. They stopped at a place where their paths split. Chiho pulled her scarf up to her mouth, gave a quick wave, and started walking in towards the new residential area.

Takuma continued in another direction. That path led to the northeast section of Morioh, a quiet area where all you could find were uninhabited villas. Takuma's house was an old stand-alone house located in the corner of that area. There was a reason that Takuma was able to rent a stand-alone house despite not having any income. The

family that had previously lived there had committed joint suicide inside it. As they lay undiscovered, their bodies rotted. There were still human-shaped stains on the floor where they had lain. With no one wanting to live in a house like that, Takuma was able to rent it for next to nothing.

When he graduated from middle school, he talked with the staff members of his orphanage and got permission to live on his own. An emotional rift had formed between himself and the people he had lived with up until then because of Takuma's power of memory. Takuma wasn't the only one who thought it would be better for him to live a quiet life alone rather than continue to live with a large group of people and it seemed that adults thought so as well. He wouldn't be reading the circumstances about why they said that again, but it was written in the leather-bound book.

When he was in elementary school and he came into possession of that leather-bound book, there was a dramatic change in his life. Past events that had occurred in his life were written in that book in the form of a novel. There was only text in the first half of the book; the pages in the second half were all blank. That represented the boundary between the past and the future. More sentences appeared every second. Every time he observed or thought something, the blank areas were filled in. The book's thickness was about the same as a 380 page tankoubon, about three centimeters, but that was not the actual number of pages in it. Even Takuma didn't know the exact number of pages in it. No matter how many pages he turned, he could never reach the back cover. More pages would just manifest themselves endlessly.

At 10 years old, he learned his mother's face, though he didn't meet her directly. A memory of when he was being hugged in his mother's arms was written in the leather-bound book. Her black hair drooping onto his face, her fingertips poking his cheek, the words she said to him, the feel of her body heat, the softness of her skin, among other things: all were all novelized in the book. At the time Takuma was still an infant and his vision had still been faint, but for that one moment when his mother's face was near his, he was able to see her facial features as if they had come into focus. By reading that description, the things he saw at that time unfolded in his mind.

There were memories written in the book from even earlier, when he was a fetus. All around him there were warm, soft things. Sometimes the amniotic fluid would shake a little by little, which surprised him. His mother must have been talking to him in the womb.

When the memories went further back, there were no clear, concrete descriptions. As it was recorded in the beginning of the book, there was continuous darkness. All there was were skin sensations that felt like he was melting into a warm liquid. Those ideas were all replaced with text inside the leather-bound book.

He didn't tell anyone about the existence of the mysterious book or about learning his mother's face. It was a secret he kept to himself as he continued his life as

he had up to that point. Before long, Takuma started to avoid those around him and spent most of his time alone.

He thought about his first memories a lot; those dark descriptions in the beginning of the book. At that time, his body was a part of his mother's body, no different from a recently-grown tip of a fingernail. To his mother, he must have been like a flesh-bud growing in her womb. He was a small protuberance that swelled up, and as if being pulled downwards by gravity, detached from his mother's body. He thought about how it was just like an apple falling out of a tree.

He returned home, ate dinner, took a shower, and fell asleep. Late at night, he had a nightmare and woke up. It was a dream he always had where there was hair tangled around the fingers of his hands and he couldn't get it off. It was dark outside his window. The world was asleep.

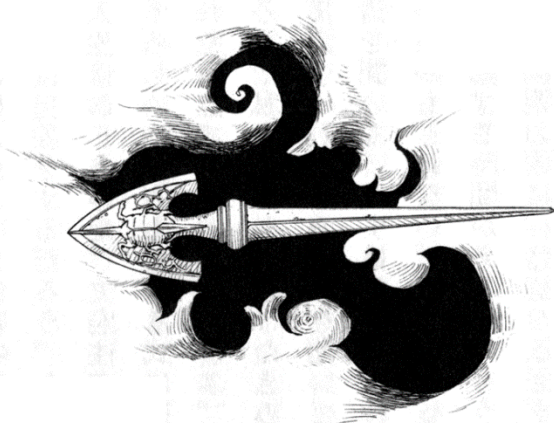
He washed his face in the bathroom and he wondered if he had screamed. He would have a nightmare that made him scream a few times a year. That was one of the many reasons he had decided to live on his own.

He soaped up his hands. No matter how much he washed them, the sensation of the hair coiling around them from his dream did not go away. When he raised his head and looked at himself in the mirror he remembered several words he had spoken.

'I have a birthmark on my shoulder. Get closer and take a look at it. You should know a baby that had a birthmark like this.'

That day, he had met her again with a glass window between them. He took off his school uniform jacket and brought his shoulder forward, showing her the horse-shaped birthmark. His father's former lover had not aged much. She looked younger than her age would imply. Through the glass window pane, he could see expensive looking wooden furniture around in the room and he saw a white cat yawning. He knew from his prior investigation that Orikasa Hanae did not interact with the people who lived nearby, so he decided to just leave here there collapsed and covered in blood on the floor. Before long, her death should reach his father's ears. He wanted to wait a bit longer for a good opportunity, but before long it would be time to visit Father, he thought.

Chapter 2



Dies iræ

Dies iræ, dies illa
solvēt sæclum in favilla:
teste David cum Sibylla

Quantus tremor est futurus,
quando iudex est venturus,
cuncta stricte discussurus

Chapter 2

Dies irae

Dies irae Dies illa
Solvat saelum in favilla:
Teste David cum Sibylla

Quantus tremor est futurus,
Quando iudex est venturus,
Cuncta stricte discussurus!

[TL Note: Dies irae (Day of Wrath) is a Latin hymn describing the day of judgement. This hymn is also part of the Christian Requiem Mass. Originally in Latin, it translates to the following.]

Day of Wrath

Day of wrath! O day of mourning!
See fulfilled the prophets' warning,
Heaven and earth in ashes burning!

Oh, what fear man's bosom rendeth,
when from heaven the Judge descendeth,
on whose sentence all dependeth.

---1---

'Come tomorrow, I'll save you. But could you keep your voice down just for tonight? If you call for help now, I'll kill myself. Because I tried to kill you, you see. If the police catch me, my life is over. They'll prove I sold off defective houses and then start arresting the terrible people I did business with one after another. If that happens, my life might as well be over. The moment you call for help, I will choose death. But before I kill myself, I'll make sure to kill that precious family of yours. I'll get revenge on you, the one that forced me into suicide, and then I'll drive my car into the sea. So please, think carefully about it. If they hear your voice, someone will come running. That person will hear about what happened from you and rescue you. I wonder how much time that will take? I wouldn't think any more than 20 minutes. Maybe an hour, tops. Either way, I do believe I'll have time to leave this building and drive my car to the house where your parents live. I do know where the house you grew up in is. I think I'll hit your sleeping parents on the head three times each with a hammer. A nice three times should do it. But if you don't want that to happen, you could just keep quiet all night tonight.'

Above the pitch-black walls, there was a beam of light from a flashlight that felt like a searchlight a guard was pointing down on her. The walls were wet with rain and the light hitting them made them shine white. Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, so that bright light felt like a sharp needle to her eyes. She squinted and tried to look up at the face on the roof, but without even having to confirm it with her eyes she knew that voice belonged to Oogami Teruhiko.

The sound of thunder echoed in the distance and the narrow view of the night sky she had between the two buildings would light up every now and then. She felt like she was at the bottom of a deep valley, rather than between two buildings.

'Please, get me out of here.'

'You never used to say such selfish things. I can't right now. I'll get you out tomorrow. First, give me some time to make a getaway. Tomorrow night I'll have already escaped overseas, so I'll call the police from there and have them come rescue you. But until I've gotten far away, I would like you to be quiet.'

Up until this morning, she had believed she wanted to spend the rest of her life with this person. He was always kind and never raised his voice. He had been the kind of person who, shortly after a fight, would make a disheartened face and admit he was wrong. But now it looked like that was all a façade.

'I came back to check if you were still alive. It looks like I'll be getting through this without having to commit murder. That's a relief.'

Was the betrayal she was feeling right now *real*? Was this some elaborate joke he'd constructed? Was it a dream? But those hidden tens of millions of yen she had found really did seem to be real bills. She had taken the bag with the money in it with her when she'd left his room. She couldn't remember right away what she'd done with it. She'd had it hanging from her hand when she called him on the pay phone and when she climbed up the stairs to the roof, though.

'I brought you something to eat. I'd assume you're hungry?'

He threw something down to her. It crossed the beam of the flashlight and fell onto the muddy ground. It was a box of doughnuts from a store he liked and went to eat at often.

'You can eat those. You've got to make sure to eat properly or you'll ruin your skin.'

She felt humiliated by the fact that she had not seen through him to discover who he really was up until this point.

'I'm not eating these,' she declared to Oogami. She wasn't going to be fooled by him anymore. What would put Oogami at ease right now more than anything else? That would of course would be her death.

'You didn't come back here to keep me alive. You came back to make sure I was dead, didn't you? These doughnuts have something harmful in them, don't they? I don't

know what that might be, but I know you could at least get your hands on something like that. You've had some dangerous people as business partners, haven't you?'

It wasn't going to end like this, she thought. She had to get out of here and hand this man over to the police.

'I won't beg for my life no matter what. And don't forget this: you need to keep me alive. Because if I die, you'll never get that thing you had hidden in your ceiling back.'

There was a long silence. During that time, the sky lit up twice, and a low, frightening sound echoed.

'Did you hate the job you have that much? If you're gonna change jobs, you should go for something besides burglary.'

A weary voice came from above. As she expected, he hadn't noticed that the money had been taken from his room.

'You had quite a bit saved up. What was it, around 50 million? If I hadn't spent so much time looking for a place to hide it, I could have made our meeting time earlier. So if these doughnuts have poison in them and I die, then you won't get that money back. Not ever.'

A little time went by, and then words flew down onto her head.

'Fine, then. Stomp those doughnuts into the ground. I'll go get some other food to throw down to you.'

It was a voice like an omnipotent god telling a divine revelation to a human.

The storm clouds cleared and the narrow strip of sky between the buildings became brighter, little by little. The sounds of salarymen in traffic jams going to work and of running cars spewing out exhaust just managed to reach Akari. For Morioh, it was a normal morning just like countless others. But for Akari, it was her first morning waking up stuck between the two buildings. In the rain, her makeup and the mud had washed off her, but her discomfort did not abate.

Undoubtedly, society was still going on out there. People were surely entering the two buildings next to her, punching their time cards and starting their work for the day. The place she was stuck at was the busiest block in the whole town. At night people stopped passing by, but of course people wouldn't disappear during weekday afternoons. If she yelled out for help, someone would surely notice. But she was hesitant to do so. Oogami's words that he would hurt her parents lay heavily on her heart. He had said that if she stayed quiet for one night, he would call for her rescue after he escaped overseas. But that deal was off. He wouldn't kill her or leave Morioh until he got his money back, Akari thought.

Her wristwatch had broken from the impact. She didn't know exactly what time it was, but it should have been around the time Oogami Teruhiko would be coming to work. On the other side of one of the walls she was surrounded by was the company she had worked at. Directly on the other side of the wall was an office. He was probably

drawing out plans and getting coffee for the female employees around now. There was a lot of noise outside. He was probably keeping watch out in case there was an ambulance coming to try to rescue her. If there was a big disturbance, he might go hurt her parents.

She didn't want her parents to get hurt. In order to avoid that, she needed to find a way she could get out without him noticing. But was there even a way to do that?

The space between the vertical walls was about one meter in width and about fifteen meters in length. There were no windows on either wall; all she saw were ventilation fans here and there. There were pretty much flat walls going up all the way to the roof and there was no chance of anyone poking their head out a window and noticing Akari was there. She felt like she had become a millimeter-long ant stuck between two encyclopedias on a bookshelf.

She couldn't climb up the intertwining pipes on the side of the alley facing the street to escape, either. When she had climbed about two meters up, there were no longer any pipes she could grab onto with her fingers. Above that space there were only pipes that went straight up to the roof that looked like a grate. No matter which angle she stared through the gaps in the pipes, she couldn't see the street. There were outdoor parts of air conditioners jutting out lengthwise that were stacked one on top of one another and parts of the wall that stuck out, completely obscuring her view. Her voice would definitely reach to the outside, but it didn't seem like she would be able to move her body to the outside.

This situation shouldn't last long. Probably around the evening, he would surely reconsider his thinking and let her out. It was summer so she didn't have the threat of freezing to death, but her body had grown cold due to it being wet from the rain. Even after morning came, not much light shone between the buildings, which left her just crouching there in the cold mud. At noon, the light of the sun finally shone through the narrow gap between the two roofs.

The gloomy gap filled with radiance, lighting up Akari's mud-covered arms. Warmth spread across her skin. She'd never known how kind the sunlight was. She thought about her mom and dad. She wanted to live in the city more; she couldn't stand the idea of taking over the farm.. Back before Morioh started developing, her mother and father openly allowed her to choose that way of life. When she was quick to pick a city university, they cheered her on then, too. And when she couldn't find a job and came back to Morioh, they took her back in without saying a word. She had done nothing but been a burden to them. She didn't want to bother them anymore.

The sun only slipped in through the gap between the buildings for 15 minutes. The light was obscured by the edge of the roof, turning it back into the dark, dreary space it was before. She decided that when she got out of here, she would go see her parents.

Night fell, and there were signs of people who had finished work for the day going home. From the side of the alleyway facing the street, she heard the sounds of tired evening footsteps. They had spent their whole day without imagining for a second that there could be a woman trapped between the two buildings.

It grew dark around her and the signs of nearby humans went away. From above, an armful of bags from Kameyuu Market as well as a box of doughnuts rained down on her.

'Good job going all day without calling for help. If I were in your place, I'm sure I would've made noise right away. I really would never have believed those threats about harming my parents, either. You really are a model daughter, aren't you?'

The light of the flashlight shone down on her. Oogami was peering over the protective fence and she saw his face just beyond the edge of the building. He was far away, so she couldn't tell what kind of expression he had on his face. She beat the side of the company building wall with her hands as hard as she could. She felt a sharp pain in the bones of her fingers from the despair-inducing hardness of it.

'For a tiny thing like you, breaking or climbing up this wall is impossible, huh? To get your soul out of there, you need a certain keyword. That is a type of location; the name of a place. As soon as those words pass your lips, that giant wall will disappear from your life. They're the "magic words" that will grant you your freedom. I'd say them soon if I were you. One sentence; all you need to do is say it. I need that money to live happily into my old age, you see. I need it to show my grandchildren magic tricks and teach them how to draw, understand?'

'If you do anything to my family, I'll bite my tongue and die and the location of the money will die with me.'

She couldn't just tell him something like that. If he got that money, the next thing he'd be thinking of is how to keep anyone who knew about it quiet. She could be sure of that.

'If anything were to happen to your family, you wouldn't know anything about it, being down in that hole. It sure is a problem, isn't it? Both of us are unable to act in order to protect the things important to us.'

'Is money seriously that important to you?'

'Your life depends on that attachment you're making fun of. If I just up and decided I didn't care about money, you would die. You really can't afford to let this troublesome situation continue very long, do you see? Now then, until you speak those magic words, I'll have to keep charge over you to make sure you don't die. It's really quite annoying, but I bought you food as well as some other things. Medicine, for example. You were in the rain all day yesterday, right? You've got to be careful not to make your cold worse.

Inside the vinyl bags she saw cold medicine, poultices, vitamin pills, and hygiene products. There was also bottled water. She was lucky the bottles didn't break after

being dropped from up on the roof. The muddy ground and trash had worked as a cushion for them. When she was looking at what was inside the bag she sensed Oogami's gaze on her and felt sick to her stomach with disgust. Then, Oogami Teruhiko spoke in a voice like he was scolding a child for being mischievous.

'That thing you took is something I obtained through putting myself in real danger. It may just be a bunch of yen to you, but to me it's like a medal. It's proof that I existed. I've thought how I want to use that money to buy my grandchildren a slide or a swing. It's true that if you said where it was, you'd lose the trump card that's been your weapon in negotiating. So, since yesterday I've been trying to come up with a deal that will guarantee your safety. I'll come again tomorrow with more food. I'll also get a blanket and some tools to keep you out of the rain. Maybe even some crossword puzzles to kill time with, too.'

The light from Oogami's flashlight disappeared as he moved away, plunging the area around in darkness. She groped around the bags to find the bottled water from the supermarket. Her hands shook, not out of fear but out of indignation instead. The idea that her these things that he had thrown down to her were tied to her survival infuriated her to no end.

When the water washed down her throat, she smelled something odd. For one moment, she wondered if the water might be really old, and then a pain pierced through her throat that felt like she had swallowed a flame.

She tried to vomit it back up, but it was too late. It wasn't just her throat; her tongue and the inside of her mouth also burned. She tried to scream, but she couldn't. She was unable to breathe or even cough. She fell to the ground and struggled, grabbing hold of the muddy ground and shoving it into her mouth. The cool sensation of the mud lessened the burning heat.

She saw a figure on the roof. It seemed that man hadn't left. He'd just turned off the flashlight and was actually observing from above the whole time. Her vision was blurred with tears and before long, the inside of her head went dark.

---2---

On the morning news show, they were talking about the subject of illegal construction. In other prefectures, several apartment buildings were found to be below the national standard for earthquake-proofing. There were also problems cropping up in which, without having so much as filed for a confirmation application for making an area on the first floor into a parking area, there were cases where apartment buildings that were turned into stores after they were completed, cases where prefab huts had been built on roofs at some point, and cases where the total lettable floor space in office buildings was larger than it had been when the application for building confirmation had been filed. In all of these cases, the inspection agency had given them a "pass" grade after construction had completed. And after that, it seems that things such as extensions being added on and remodeling being done had happened without first getting permission. There were countless cases of such illegal activity all across Japan. It seemed that some money had been secretly changing hands behind closed doors, and Morioh was no exception. With Morioh's sudden, rapid development, there were lots of recently-built and brand-new houses and there were bound to be many illegal activities like this littered all over that just hadn't come to light yet.

He watched the TV out of the corner of his eye as he got ready. The image on the screen changed completely and bright music came on as a weather forecast started. It was Friday, January 7th, 2000. Morioh was going to have a clear day starting right in the morning. It was the first day of his third semester.

When he was putting on his school uniform, the many remaining scars on his arms caught his eye. The remains of scratching them with his fingernails and scars from cutting himself with scissors still remained on his body. They were remnants of his unstable boyhood days. The long-sleeved school uniform was perfect for covering them, and Budougaoka High School allowed students to wear long sleeves even in the summer. Thanks to that, he was able to keep his arms hidden all year long. He had written a fake medical record in the hospital, allowing him to not have to attend classes like phys-ed, where it's required to change clothes. He never took his coat off at school. The only ones who knew about the scars on his arms were his old friends and the staff at the orphanage.

Before he left his house, he stared at a postcard that he had stuck to his wall with pushpins. There was a photo of a grass-covered plain and two horses standing there huddled together printed on it. They were small in the center of the picture so you couldn't make out their facial features, but both horses were colored black. As he stared at the photo, the horses looked like *jet* for a moment.

Jet was a name an ancient people had used in reference to a certain mineral. He thought maybe he would make his ability's name into this. Using the name of that mineral as a part of his ability's name seemed like a good idea. Even though it had been

many years since he had become able to see it, he still hadn't given the dark brown leather-bound book a name.

On his way to the school, he stopped at the convenience store in front of the train station. He opened up newspapers, flipped through some manga magazines, and left. As long as he had one minute to spare, he could memorize all of the pages so he didn't need to buy anything. He hadn't actually read them, but if they entered his field of vision, then a description of them would remain in the leather-bound book. When he had time later, he would read back through that text and every nook and cranny of those pages would reappear correctly in his head. Every day he would stand around reading without buying anything, which made the store employees hate him.

When he got to school, everyone in the classroom was talking about how they had spent their winter breaks. Every bit of noise that emitted from his classmates was sucked into his mind. He didn't hear each individual voice, but he recorded the noise like he constantly had a tape recorder running.

He had to be careful to communicate with his classmates. It would look conspicuous to not have a single friend, so he got on speaking terms with several people while at the same time keeping a good feeling of distance between them. He couldn't be alone in a classroom, but he couldn't get too into a conversation, either. He limited his conversations to entertainers, stories he'd seen on TV and complaining about teachers.

As far as people he currently hung out with outside the classroom went, there was only Futaba Chiho. One reason he wasn't as distant with her was because he thought that he could more soundly keep up appearances if he had one good female friend. There were other reasons, too, but if he said them to her he was sure she'd get mad, so he kept them hidden.

On the first day of the third semester, after the opening ceremony, there were just 90 minutes of class. The class was on history and geography, but as soon as they started the teacher began to pass out papers for a pop quiz. His classmates let out sounds that were kind of like shrieks. He made the same kind of face that they did so he wouldn't stand out.

Five minutes into the test, he called out his leather-bound book. When he imagined the book in his head, it would appear, floating up from his palm like a submarine surfacing. It wasn't a book made with normal paper or printing techniques. It had almost unlimited pages, but its width was no different from a tankoubon you'd find in a bookstore.

He flipped through the pages searching for the answers to the test questions. What he had seen when he'd flipped through history textbooks was also there in text form. While he was gathering the solutions from his "past," the teacher noticed, thinking his behavior was a bit odd. Apparently, he thought Takuma might be cheating, but the

teacher couldn't see Takuma's book so he figured it must have been his imagination and simply passed by.

While he was getting ready to go home, he had a conversation with three other classmates. During the conversation, the title of a manga he'd never heard of came up. He called out the leather-bound book, searched for the words, and judged that it was a particular gag manga he'd seen serialized in a manga magazine three years earlier. What he'd seen when he was flipping through that magazine was written in the leather-bound book so as he was talking with his classmates, in his mind he extracted that event and read the manga that had been recorded in the corner of his field of vision.

Moments of his past he had in his memories could be rewound and replayed in slow-mo in his head like a video tape. The event of reading the magazine had gone by in a moment when it had actually happened, but now he could carefully go through it one page at a time. Even the drawings of the manga became visible to him through the text. It was similar to the way a TV could turn a simple electric signal into a video and music. As he was reading through the descriptive text, the panel layout of the manga reconstructed itself in his head.

He then started talking about his impressions of the manga he had just finished reading to his classmate. Their memories were vague, but Takuma knew so much detail he was able to quote specific lines from it. He continued this not-too-excited moderate conversation for a few minutes. It was an incredibly boring few minutes.

The words he exchanged with his classmates simply made his eardrums vibrate and immediately disappeared. A description of them would remain recorded in the leather-bound book, but they would not weigh at all on his mind. Even the smiles on his classmate's faces just gently glanced across the front of his eyeballs and scattered away. The scene of the classroom that should definitely have been in front of his eyes became so unreal that it made him want to doubt it was actually there at all.

Someday, he would get away from here and escape to some other place, he thought. He'd get on a train or a bus and leave this town, looking for a place like one on that postcard where grassy plains stretched to the horizon.

He headed towards front entrance to leave for home and three boys standing around talking next to the umbrella stand caught his eye. The noon sun slipped through the entrance to the school, pouring light onto their school uniforms. Of the three boys, two were tall and one was a bit shorter than average.

Previously, he had snuck into the staff room at night and glanced over a large amount of documents. The documents had photos of the faces of every student in the school as well as their address data written on them. That experience had been compressed into text form and stored in the leather-bound book. But he knew those three boys' names without even opening his book.

The short boy was a student named Hirose Kouichi. He was the one who first discovered Orikasa Hanae's body and reported it to the police. When Takuma searched

for his face and name in the leather-bound book, he learned that Hirose Kouichi was someone he'd passed by in town and at school many times. Takuma had even passed behind him as he stood around reading magazines at the convenience store and stood right next to him when they were waiting for crossing signals. But Takuma didn't think Kouichi would remember him.

The people Hirose Kouichi was talking to were Higashikata Jousuke and Nijimura Okuyasu, both of whom were delinquents. Hirose Kouichi seemed like the kind of normal student that wouldn't hang out with delinquents, but apparently he went around with these two a lot and with Higashikata Jousuke in particular. He was quite famous; there was no one in the school who didn't know who he was because of his hair style. Some thought his pompadour looked like a space ship, while others thought it looked like a bullet train, while still others thought it looked like a battleship. It was bizarre seeing someone with a normal appearance like Hirose Kouichi next to Higashikata Jousuke and his weirdo hairstyle.

Takuma was interested in what Hirose Kouichi was thinking now, seeing as he was the first one to discover the corpse. So he pretended to tie his shoelace and attempted to watch their lips from a distance. Their lips just needed to be in the corner of his vision. He'd practiced so he could tell what they were saying just by reading the movements of their lips and, using his ability to replay every exact detail of visual information he had taken in, he had become quite good at reading lips. He stood around 10 meters away from them, put his bag down in a corner of the hallway, and started to re-tie his shoes, thoroughly taking his time.

A large group of students passed between them so he did not hear the words Hirose Kouichi was saying. All that entered his ears were the voices of the crowd of people passing by and the sounds of their footsteps at the front entrance.

"Redmarksonhisarms"

Hirose Kouichi's lips formed those sounds. Takuma wondered for a second if he'd seen wrong, but Hirose Kouichi continued to talk to Higashikata Jousuke and Nijimura Okuyasu with a serious expression.

"Thekillermightbeinthisschool"

A pack of girls walked cheerfully out of the school building. While crouching there in quite a light-hearted scene, he made a troubled face.

Hirose Kouichi and the other two boys started walking. They didn't go outside, but rather left the umbrella stand they were standing next to and headed toward the first-year classrooms. They were on course to pass by Takuma crouching in the corner of the hallway in thirty seconds. He held his breath and tied his shoe as he waited for them to pass by.

It was definitive. Hirose Kouichi and the others were undoubtedly talking about the Orikasa Hanae incident. Currently, the public account was that Orikasa Hanae had not been killed, they were just handling it as a "mysterious death." But they had used

the word "killer." As in, they had positive proof that someone had killed her. And they even knew about the scars on the arms.

Suddenly, someone shoved Takuma from behind. He stumbled and put his hand on the wall to balance himself. His fountain pen dropped out of his pocket and rolled onto the ground. It was a pen given to him by a friend he called Crybaby Boy when he had started living on his own. Crybaby Boy had been taken in by relatives from Kyushu and was probably living a happy life now.

'Don't just squat there spacing out. I'll kill you, you goddamn idiot!'

It seemed that a passerby had not been looking where he was going and knocked into him. A second-year boy looked down at Takuma. He had shaved eyebrows, baggy pants, and the kind of dangerous looking upturned eyes that made Takuma think that he might be high on drugs.

'Sorry.'

Takuma lowered his head and the student spit out a brown loogie, which landed on top of Takuma's shoes. The student snorted with laughter and walked away.

Takuma reached out his hand to pick up the fallen fountain pen. It was a smooth, black pen decorated with golden rings; it was a type you could get anywhere. Just before his fingers were going to wrap around it, the sound of the fountain pen being stepped on and broken echoed around the area.

'Whoops, sorry.'

Takuma looked up and saw Nijimura Okuyasu in front of him. He was the one who had stepped on the pen. Next to him were Hirose Kouichi and Higashikata Jousuke. They looked back with a "What happened?" kind of expression on their faces.

Nijimura Okuyasu lifted his foot. The fountain pen had broken in two, right down the middle. The ink inside was leaking out through the crack and had seeped between the broken pen fragments.

'Sorry, man. It wasn't on purpose,' said Nijimura Okuyasu with an apologetic look on his face. He had a strong build, a short haircut, and was making an unrefined expression. He was a delinquent who gave the impression of being a stupid comedic sidekick and he was actually stupid in real life, too. There were rumors he couldn't even add two digit numbers together. Seeing him up close like this with that look on his face, Takuma thought those rumors were probably true.

'Well, I was thinking about throwing it out soon anyhow.'

Takuma gathered up the broken fragments, opened a handkerchief in his hand, and put the broken pieces on top of it. The thick blue color of the ink on the fragments was staining into the handkerchief. Hirose Kouichi and Higashikata Jousuke gathered around, leaving Takuma now surrounded by three people. He seriously wanted to click his tongue at them.

'Could I see it for a sec?'

Higashikata Jousuke peered into the palm of Takuma's hand. His duck bill-like bangs hit him in the face and almost poked him in the eyes. He had finely chiseled features for someone Japanese. He was popular with girls, too. They always gave him enthusiastic greetings when he was walking home. Rumor had it that his father was a Westerner.

'Yeah, it should turn out okay, actually. This is one 'a those types that fix themselves if you wait a little bit.'

He had a friendly expression that reminded Takuma of a puppy.

'Fix itself?'

Jousuke seemed to ignore this statement. And then, for an instant, there was a blur and he looked like Jousuke had two arms layered on top of each other. It was like an image on a broken TV. But in the blink of an eye his vision went back to normal, and he was sure he had imagined it.

'Here, take a look. This must be made outta that shape-memory alloy stuff. It's seriously awesome.'

Higashikata Jousuke looked into Takuma's hand with a surprised expression on his face. Up until a moment ago, there were fragments of a broken fountain pen in his hand. But now, those pieces had joined together and returned to their original rod-shape. There wasn't even any sign of a crack on the whole thing.

Had the pen being broken been an optical illusion? But he was sure he had picked up the broken fragments. And even after the pen was fixed, the stain on the handkerchief from the ink that had leaked out still remained. It was an impossible phenomenon, but there it was in the palm of his hand.

'Let's get goin', Okuyasu.'

Higashikata Jousuke said that to his friend and started to walk away. Nijimura Okuyasu walked next to him and the two left.

'You must be glad. It's back to normal.'

Hirose Kouichi said before turning to catch up with the other two. The sounds of the students' chatter echoed through the hallway. Their voices dissolved into the voice of a teacher scolding someone, the sounds of girls laughing, and other noise. They then disappeared into a crowd of uniforms.

Outside of being restored to its original state, the fountain pen had no changes to it whatsoever. He wiped it with his ink-stained handkerchief and put it in his chest pocket. Suddenly, the brown spittle that was stuck to his shoe entered his vision, which he wiped with the handkerchief as well.

He'd originally planned to leave the school immediately, but he'd decided to change his course of action and headed for the third floor of the school. In a hall of second year classrooms, he found the male student who had spit on his shoes a few minutes earlier. He headed for a stairway landing where there didn't seem to be any people nearby. It was a place where the delinquents would always go to smoke in

secret. The stairwell was completely quiet; you couldn't hear a single voice. When he got to the landing, the delinquent realized he was being followed. He turned around and furrowed his thinly-shaved eyebrows. 'Who the hell's there?!' he screamed. He immediately covered his face with his bag and examined the area. There wasn't anyone around but the two of them. When his voice disappeared, a calm presence returned to the corner of the school.

His field of vision of the moment when Higashikata Jousuke had come close to him and when he had looked down at the broken pieces of the fountain pen had been recorded. He hadn't imagined Higashikata Jousuke's arm doubling. From out of his arm covered by his uniform rose another arm, like his soul had split off from him. It was very similar to what had happened when the leather-bound book appeared out of Takuma's palm. The new arm moved at an incredible speed. Clenching its hands into a fist, it touched the contents of Takuma's hand for just an instant. Or so it seemed, anyhow. After that one moment, the arm returned to overlap with Higashikata Jousuke's arm and disappeared. The whole thing happened at a speed so fast that one couldn't normally follow it with the naked eye. It took him quite a few re-reads of the book's description of it before he could finally understand what had happened.

He didn't know the true identity of Higashikata Jousuke's third arm or whatever it was. But he thought that it was probably the cause of his fountain pen being repaired. The moment the fragments went back to normal had not been in his field of vision, so unfortunately that was not recorded in the book. With clever hand movements like those of a skilled magician, Higashikata Jousuke's palm had blocked Takuma's view. In the moment when his palm had passed over the fragments, the fountain pen had returned to normal.

He was sure of one thing about that arm: it was just like his leather-bound book in that it was a mysterious power that could be called out at any time and could not be seen by normal humans. It was the first time he had met someone other than himself that had one of these bizarre abilities. And perhaps it was not only Higashikata Jousuke, but also Hirose Kouichi and even Nijimura Okuyasu who were endowed with these abilities. Maybe that was how they had gotten hold of those pieces of information regarding the Orikasa Hanae case and why they were exchanging information.

He slipped into a group of first year girls at the front entrance of the school. There were more than 10 girls gathering in the hallway, each getting ready to go home. They were emanating a very fun atmosphere, and it sounded like they were planning to all sing karaoke after this.

He spotted Futaba Chiho's face among them. He frequently passed by or saw Chiho inside the school. She was always surrounded by lots of friends and it was rare to see her walking the hallways alone. She swung her bag around sluggishly as she laughed with friends and they were scolded by a teacher for being too loud.

As he passed by the pack of girls, Futaba Chiho looked toward him. She raised a hand up to greet him, but Takuma pretended not to notice and passed right by. It wasn't the time for that right now.

When he exited the building, the cold January wind chilled his body through his school uniform. He had a high tolerance for heat and cold, so he didn't mind it. As he walked toward the school gate, he felt the presence of a person approaching him from behind. When the heels of the person's shoes hit the pavement, he could tell by the sound that arose from it that it was her.

'Were you staying after school? You're usually not still hanging around this late.'

Chiho had caught up to him and now was walking next to him. She had her usual white scarf made out of a simple fabric wrapped around her neck and mouth. Her bag was hanging in her hands, which were covered by thick gloves.

'Well, what were *you* doing here so late? It's way past the time you could have gone home.'

'I got caught up in conversation with some friends in the classroom. Stuff about the Red and White Singing Contest they held on New Year's Eve and about wanting to copy each other's homework we did over winter break.'

'That sounds tiring.'

'No, I'm feeling really refreshed.'

'You sure are forthright.'

She frequently turned around. Maybe she was concerned about her friends seeing that she had left the school.

'So what were you doing, Senpai?'

'Cleaning. There was some filthy trash around.'

As they left through the school gate, they heard the siren of an ambulance that had stopped at the entrance to the school. Chiho turned around and mumbled something.

'I wonder if something happened...'

'I'll bet they found somebody wounded and collapsed. Probably at that stairway landing the delinquents always sneak off to smoke at.'

He wouldn't be leaving the hospital any time soon, and that guy would definitely not be explaining what had been done to him or by whom. That was because he did not see his attacker's face and honestly didn't know what method the person had used to wound him in the first place.

---3---

During class, I thought about that white cat. The female cat named Trinita that Orikasa Hanae had been keeping. After we had checked her memories in Kishibe Rohan's studio, I stealthily returned her to the police station.

My older teacher who was wearing heavy clothes turned to me and said 'Keep your eyes up front.' He was writing English sentences on the blackboard with white chalk. It was an elective course, so there were students from several different classes there. They had sleepy looks on their faces and were flipping through pages of their textbooks. Seeing those gestures reminded me of Kishibe Rohan looking through Trinita's memories. "Heaven's Door." That was the name he had given his Stand. The sentences that were written in the pages of Trinita's body were the memories of what the cat herself had witnessed. Heaven's Door converts the abstract concept of memories into a series of written characters. The cat didn't know actual words like "ball of yarn" or "school uniform." It was probably because Kishibe Rohan knew them that those words appeared on the cat's body. On that line of logic, if Kishibe Rohan thought in Italian, then would the cat's memories be written in Italian, too?

Words and memories seem to be linked by some ambiguous bond, don't they? Like if the symbols representing "meow" enter one's vision, the image of a cat would appear in their mind. If they see the symbols for "boyoyoing" it makes them imagine something soft and springy. Truly, the symbols of written characters awaken memories in us.

The teacher had a classmate read English sentences from the textbook. I was relieved he hadn't called on me. The weather outside seemed cold as usual, and the whole sky was covered with gray clouds. The students out on the school grounds for phys-ed sure looked cold, but the classroom was nice and warm. My teacher, who had been wearing heavy clothes, had put his jacket on his desk at some point. He wiped sweat from his brow and adjusted the controls on the heater near the window. It looked like he was gonna turn the heat down.

This reminded me of a certain experiment. A person who had been hypnotized had been made to believe the statement "you are having a lit end of a cigarette pressed onto the back of your hand." Of course, this wasn't actually happening in real life. But the subject broke out in a sweat and started to act like he was hot. A blister even formed on the back of his hand, meaning that the thing he had believed in his mind had had physical effects on his body. When a shaman writes text on a note and hangs it somewhere as a charm, he's probably aiming for a similar effect. He makes people see the symbols of written characters. The brain then draws out an image that corresponds with that text which psychologically, or perhaps physically, brings about some effect. Using that, a shaman could do things like curse or heal people.

While the teacher repeatedly adjusted the heater, sweat dripped down from his tilted head. Even after turning the heater completely off, the temperature in the room

didn't go down whatsoever, which he appeared to find strange. My classmates seemed hot, too. Some people started fanning themselves with their desk mats as the temperature in the classroom continued to rise. It was scorching, like on a summer afternoon or like asphalt heating in the sun, causing a heat haze. "Scorching." If that word appeared as a sound effect written in a panel of a manga, it would make the image of summer heat appear in the reader's head. Those characters would make them imagine the heat of the sun. Finally, a male student stood up and placed his hand on a window. It seemed like he was going to try to bring in the cold air from outside. But when he tried to undo the lock, he let out a scream.

'What the hell is this?!'

All of the locks on the windows had hair tangled in them. Countless long, black hairs. The boy tried to free his hands from the hair, but it was though the hair was holding some kind of grudge and he could not untangle himself from it. Of course, some hair floating in the air had not become tangled in the window lock by coincidence. I turned my head to look at a female student named Yamagishi Yukako. Yukako-san was ignoring the commotion our classmates were making and was staring at her textbook. She was a beautiful girl that gave off an image of some kind of carnivorous beast, like a lion. She had a very intense personality, so everyone was afraid of her. She brushed back the long hair that she prided herself in and sat there without changing the expression on her face.

Even though it was a classroom in the dead of winter with a heater off, the temperature continued to "scorching"-ly rise until it became like the kind of heat you'd feel in August. Everyone knew how inexplicable this was, but left with no alternative, they started taking off their uniform jackets and sitting down. People wearing long-sleeved shirts rolled them up their arms. People who were wearing sweatshirts underneath took them off so they were only wearing t-shirts. One by one, they ended up with short or rolled up sleeves, exposing their arms. Seeing this, my mind was finally met with relief because as I looked at all of my friends, I didn't see any sort of red scratch marks.

"Echoes." That is the name of my Stand. Just by willing it, my tailed Stand would appear behind my back. It looked like a lizard, but occasionally it would walk around on two legs in the form of a small human. He floated around the inside of the classroom, but my classmates and my teacher didn't notice him at all. That's because of the rule that the only ones who can see "Stands" are "Stand users."

I sent an order to Echoes. The tailed Stand landed on the ground and peeled the "scorching" characters off the floor. He rolled the characters into a ball and kneaded them like clay. Once he had shaped them properly, he stuck them onto the end of his tail. Immediately coinciding with the disappearance of the letters, the classroom regained the coldness of winter and my classmates put their jackets back on with baffled looks on their faces.

'Thanks for your help back there.'

I said to Yukako-san at her desk after class was over. With an embarrassed look on her face, she said:

'It's no problem. I'm really happy to be of any help to you, Kouichi-kun.'

At that moment, a male student who was trying to run out into the hallway knocked into me with his shoulder and almost made me fall over. The boy muttered a quick 'sorry' and hurried on forward. But after a few steps, he suddenly tripped and fell to the ground on his hands and knees. I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't been looking closely, but there was hair tangled around his ankle. It had coiled around his ankle in a way that looked like it was constricting him and he breathed heavily like he was in pain. Yukako-san turned to look at him with an expression like she was looking at an insect and let out a loud "hmpf" from her nose.

'Yukako-san!'

When I called out her name, the hair coiled around the boy's ankle fell apart like it had lost its strength and fell on the ground. Then, without any sort of timidity in her voice, Yukako-san said this:

'Ah, that's right. If I'm going to kill him, it would be better to be in a place where no one's around.'

Tuesday, January 11th, 2000.

Jousuke-kun, Okuyasu-kun and I were searching the school for someone with red scars on their arms. The boy we thought had killed Orikasa Hanae would be wearing a school uniform, so we thought he must be someone in middle or high school. There was a possibility that he was taking classes in that very building, so we were checking male students' arms using our own personal methods.

Come lunch break, we still hadn't found any boys that seemed like they could be the culprit, though we didn't think we'd be able to locate the boy with the scars in just one day. It was likely to be a task that would take several days. But if that boy had a Stand ability like we did we were sure to encounter him eventually. That is because there is a saying that 'Stand users are drawn to other Stand users,' like two planets being drawn together by their gravitational pulls. Even if we didn't want it to happen, before long we would be sure to run into the boy with the scars.

However, we found the boy with the scars before that day was even over.



---4---

The entrance to the bookstore was made of glass, so you could see the faces of anyone passing by outside even if you were inside the building. Chiho stood around near the entrance reading a magazine and occasionally glanced outside. Students on their way home from school braced themselves against the cold as they walked towards the train station. The sky had been cloudy since morning, and it looked like the day would end without the sun ever peeking through. She checked the time on her phone; it was about time Hasumi-senpai would be coming. As soon as Senpai's lessons were over, he wouldn't linger around the classroom for a second. He would always leave the school like he was running away, so it was easy to predict when and where he'd be passing by.

There was something she wanted to ask him about her novel. It had been two years since she had decided she'd try to write her own novel. Over those years, she would wonder several times a day, just what *is* a novel? It was a pretty crazy feeling for an author to have, when you thought about it. Normally, they just passionately get down to weaving together a story, right? But, what even *is* a story in the first place?

Since she had entered high school, she had made a lot of friends. The majority were girls, but she talked with boys in her class to a moderate degree. They all ate at the school cafeteria and go to peep in on clubs. But she had no one to talk openly about writing novels with. When people asked what her hobbies were, when she said "reading," things were fine. But when she said "writing," she thought it made the situation feel awkward. The only people she talked about writing her own novel with were her family, her friend that went to a girl's high school in S City, and Hasumi-senpai. When it came to finding people to ask opinions about novels, she felt Senpai was qualified.

Through the window pane, she saw the side of a face she recognized. Looking closely, it was a somewhat gloomy face. She closed the magazine and put it back on the shelf. She walked out of the bookstore, and while bracing herself against the freezing cold, she hurried ahead of a few people and walked up to the back of someone clad in a black school uniform who was walking on their own. Even among a huge crowd, she could spot Hasumi-senpai's back. He had no muscle whatsoever beyond what you could describe as skinny or slender. It was at the point where he gave the impression of being meager.

Even when she walked next to him and give a quick greeting, Senpai didn't even grin. He just glanced in her direction to acknowledge that he saw her. He was pretty much always like this. When she asked him what he thought the things we called novels were, he spoke in a voice colder than permafrost.

'If that's the sorta thing you're worrying about, then you're probably better off not writing one.'

'Well, I was just thought that knowing you, Senpai, you'd have some interesting thoughts on the subject.'

'What would give you that idea?'

'Because you have so many books stored in your head.'

She wasn't sure if it was because of that or not, but he had the smell of old books hanging about him. It was so distinct that she could close her eyes next to him and imagine that it wasn't a human there, but a tall stack of book pages.

'What I remember are the tens of thousands of actual *books*. The order of the words on all their pages. Purely the books, not the novels.'

'Well, I guess books and novels might be different...'

'They're as dramatically different as the body and the mind.'

Hasumi-senpai's memory thing was apparently like the data from scanning the pages of books. He had a huge amount of image data in his head, and he was able to take that out at any time and look at it. He did nothing more than hold the data. As for the meaning of the data, he couldn't know that without passing it in front of his eyes like anyone else would. She highly preferred books made out of paper, so she wasn't sure whether or not she would enjoy reading books using memories like that, but it did at least seem like a good way to kill time on long train rides.

'But if there were an ultimate novel in all of human history...'

Hasumi-senpai said. He was meager, but he was also tall. At the height Chiho's eyes were at were his exceedingly thin arms covered by the black school uniform.

'...You might be able to kill people with it.'

Before long, they could see the dome roof of Morioh Station. It was a train station with Western-style architecture that was rebuilt when the town was redeveloped. The bus stop was in in a roundabout in front of the train station. They had constructed a circular pond in the plaza at the center. Everyone that came to Morioh knew that in that pond there were some turtles that had made their residence there.

They had crossed the street from the bus stop and were passing around the side of the lake when it happened. They heard a voice calling from behind them and both of them stopped simultaneously.

'Um, excuse me a sec. Do you got a wristwatch? Would you mind tellin' me the time? I kinda need to figure out how long it is til the bus gets here...'

They turned around and there was a tall male student standing there. Even among the first years, he really stood out, so they knew both his face and his name. He was a tall figure with refined facial features. What stood out most of all was that devastating hair style. If you happened to get one glimpse of it, you couldn't forget it for days and it would even show up in your dreams, she'd heard.

'Could I just see that wristwatch for a sec?'

Higashikata Jousuke looked at Hasumi-senpai's wrist.

Chiho was nervous. Ever since that dangerous situation she had met with in elementary school, she hadn't been very good with people that looked kind of delinquent-ish. Higashikata Jousuke wore a baggy school uniform and his backpack was squashed flat. So if this wasn't a delinquent, she didn't know who was.

'Oh, you do have a wristwatch.'

Chiho nudged Senpai with her elbow. There was a silver wristwatch around his wrist.

'All right.'

As always, Senpai nodded without as much as a grin. He extended a thin arm to Higashikata Jousuke. She thought he was going to show him his wristwatch, but she was wrong. He pointed straight towards the train station.

'There's a clock on the train station. Why don't you just go look at that?'

He said it in a particularly curt manner.

Senpai! Her face went pale. Senpai and the delinquent stared at each other's faces.

'The clock over there...?'

Higashikata Jousuke turned back toward the train station with what looked like a troubled expression on his face. It was at that moment when Chiho first noticed it. The clock on the train station building was broken. The long hand was heavily bent and the short hand had disappeared somewhere. There was a round hole on the face of the clock like a rock or something had collided with it.

'That's weird. I'm sure it was workin' perfectly when I saw it this mornin'...'

It seemed that Hasumi-senpai had only just noticed it then as well.

'I dunno, man. Maybe somebody broke it. But anyhow, now I can't tell what time it is just lookin' at that.'

Higashikata Jousuke sat down on the edge of the pond. The edge of the circular pond in the middle of the roundabout was made of concrete. Higashikata Jousuke casually picked up a paper clip that had fallen onto the ground. It was a clip that looked like it was made from one long slender piece of metal. He bent it with both hands, stretched it into a long pole shape and started playing with it. It came off to Chiho as very odd.

'Senpai, c'mon. Your wristwatch.'

Had Senpai not heard the terrible rumors about Higashikata Jousuke? When her friends talked about Higashikata Jousuke, it always sounded like he was an extremely dangerous guy. Apparently even the third year delinquents never went near him despite him only being in first year.

Making an "oh well" sort of face, Hasumi-senpai looked at his wristwatch. He looked like he was going to say what time it was, but before he could announce the time out loud, Higashikata Jousuke came up to Senpai, brought his face incredibly close to him, and peered down at the watch as well as the wrist it was on.

'Cool. Thanks, Senpai.'

'...No problem. I do owe you for my fountain pen.'

Without betraying any emotion, Hasumi-senpai pointed a cold gaze at him.

Higashikata Jousuke looked at Senpai's face, looked down at the top of the fountain pen poking out of his pocket, and a smile stretched across his face. It was an expression like he'd suddenly remembered something. It seemed that somehow, this wasn't the first time the two had met.

'What sorta slight-of-hand trick did you use back then?'

'I told ya, man. I just put the raw materials back to how they were.'

'Ah well, whatever.'

Hasumi-senpai tried to pull in his arm and Higashikata Jousuke grabbed it in a panic.

'Hold up a sec. My eyes were kinda blurry, I didn' get a good look.'

The wrist watch was hidden by his jacket sleeve. While Higashikata Jousuke was grabbing Hasumi-senpai's wrist with one hand, he used his other hand to try to roll up his sleeve. It was unmistakably an action with the goal of getting a good look at the wristwatch, but something about it seemed very purposeful and unnatural. With his sleeve pulled up, Senpai's pale skin was visible. Sensei never took his jacket off, so Chiho had never seen his skin past his wrists. But before the wristwatch could become visible,

Hasumi-senpai grabbed Higashikata Jousuke's hand and forced it back.

'Don't just go grabbing other people's uniforms.'

He shook Higashikata Jousuke's arm off. Chiho wanted to say 'Don't be so rough!' but she couldn't get her voice out. She thought she might make Higashikata Jousuke angry, and when she looked over at his face timidly, not only was he not mad, he looked bewildered and had a shaken look on his face.

'But I... just wanted ta look at the watch...'

'I have no proof you washed your hands the last time you went to the bathroom, now do I?'

Higashikata Jousuke had a hurt expression on his face.

'I washed 'em. You've gotta believe me, man. I swear ta God.'

He put an intense look on his face, and maybe because of his hair style or his posture, he gave off an aloof impression, different from that of a normal person. But looking at it from right next to him, the expression kept changing constantly making it actually kinda hilarious. The exact opposite of the always-unsociable Hasumi-senpai, she thought.

'Well, fine. Right now, the time is 4:40 PM. I hope the bus gets here soon.'

As Senpai read the time on his watch aloud, he looked back at Chiho.

'Shall we get going?'

At that moment there was a *clink* sound. It was the sound of Senpai's wristwatch buckle coming undone on its own. It slipped down from his wrist and, leaving a streak of silver in its path, fell straight down.

There was a circular pond right next to them. After the watch collided with the concrete rim around the pond, it made a sound like a rock being tossed in as it fell into the pond. The water's surface quivered from the impact and little floating pieces of ice hit each other. The turtle that lived in it was nowhere to be seen. It was probably hibernating for the winter. The wristwatch sunk to the bottom of the pond and some small bubbles rose from it.

It was so cold it was hard to believe the pond wasn't frozen. If it were frozen over like it was yesterday or the day before, the watch wouldn't have sunk. Chiho couldn't help but think that some demon that brought misfortune onto people must have broken the ice earlier.

'Man, that really sucks.'

Higashikata Jousuke peered into the pond.

'But I think you're okay. All the watches they make these days are totally waterproof. And even if it is broken, I'll fix it up for ya. I got a knack for fixing broken gadgets and stuff.'

It was hard to tell if Hasumi-senpai was listening to what he was saying. He was bent at the waist, picking up something small that had fallen on the ground. What Senpai picked up was the paper clip that Higashikata Jousuke had been holding a moment earlier. But while Higashikata Jousuke had been playing with it and bent it into a long rod, it was now back into its original paper clip shape.

'You said your name was Higashikata Jousuke, right?'

Hasumi-senpai stared squarely at him.

'I've heard of you because you're quite famous. Is this another one of your slight-of-hand tricks? You used your power to turn things back to normal to undo the clasp on the wristwatch, didn't you? Like maybe you stuck that paper clip you made into a straight rod in a gap in the clasp or something, right?'

'I dunno what the heck you're talkin' about. I'm pretty sure that ain't the paper clip I had a minute ago. Anyhow, maybe you should hurry up and get the wristwatch out from the bottom of the pond? I'd like ta get it for ya, but there's a turtle in this pond, ya see. Though he'll in hibernation right now. I'm still kinda too scared to stick my hand in that water.'

Higashikata Jousuke looked down at the pond with an apologetic look on his face. Just for an instant, he glanced sideways to Senpai. His gaze gave the impression that that he was trying to observe something. It was odd that Hasumi-senpai wouldn't show him his wristwatch, but this Higashikata Jousuke person, despite being a fellow a high school student the same age as them, also seemed quite odd.

'Go ahead, Senpai, pick it up. Your hand is only gonna be cold for a sec.'

Hasumi-senpai only stared down silently towards the bottom of the pond, not making any indication that he was going to pick the watch up. At this point, Higashikata Jousuke made a face like he'd understood something and spoke.

'Ah, yeah. Just so ya know, ya really might wanna pull your sleeve up so it doesn't get wet.'

Hasumi-senpai looked back at him with a glare, though Senpai's eyes were narrower than the average person's so it always looked like he was glaring whenever he looked at someone.

'You're a pretty funny guy, aren't you?'

The air suddenly grew tense. The mood was turning into a dangerous one.

'...I thought you were pretty weird. Maybe I've actually got the right guy. Senpaiiii, mind if I ask your name?'

Higashikata Jousuke's polite demeanor had disappeared. Chiho shrunk back from the sound of his deep voice. Senpai showed no sign of agitation.

'Hey, what point would there be in introducing ourselves? This is just one person asking for the time and the other person telling them. Or do you go around the town asking the name of everybody you get the time from?'

'Couldn't ya just show me your arm? If ya don't give me permission, I honestly don't have a problem checkin' it by force.'

'Why, pray tell, do you want to see my arm?'

'Quit playing dumb already. How the hell many people do you think I've asked so far? You seem pretty dead set against rolling up your sleeves. And that's because there's something you don't want people to see on the skin on your arms. Since you're hidin' 'em, I'm sure you figured out what is is we're looking for, right?'

'I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about. But you really are a funny guy.'

For the first time that day, sunlight crept through the clouds, shining a light on the wide area in front of the train station. Chiho squinted from the brightness. The sun sinking in the West was dyeing Morioh a shade of red. All Chiho could do was gulp and stand there silently. Before long, Hasumi-senpai opened his mouth.

'Chiho, you asked me a question about novels before, didn't you?' said Senpai, glaring at Higashikata Jousuke.

'I suppose that a novel is something made up of many lines of characters. The characters are symbols which, when strung together, form words. When words are strung together, they form sentences. And then when sentences are linked together, they become a novel. Much like how DNA is made up of base sequences, characters are arranged into a sequence. That is what I consider a novel.'

After he said that, Senpai stuck his hand into the water without rolling his sleeve up. Once he grabbed the watch and pulled it up, Senpai's school uniform's sleeve was thoroughly soaked and a large volume of water dripped from it.

'I expect that the job of an author is a lot like weaving a thread to create a carpet. The shape woven with the thread that is the long sequence of characters is not a simple visual image, but a certain type of value or an emotion that cannot be put into words.'

Higashikata Jousuke looked down at Senpai's soaked sleeve.

'So you're admitting it?'

When he said this in a voice full of conviction, the sound of footsteps drew near.

A tall male student was running towards them from the station building. It was a student by the name of Nijimura Okuyasu who was always hanging around with Higashikata Jousuke. He was also a delinquent that was famous around the school. Higashikata Jousuke had looks that the girls seemed to like, but Nijimura Okuyasu was a person that gave you this terrible feeling from looking at him, like looking at a mad dog. And not just a mad dog; a *tosa* breed of dog.

'Jousuke!'

Nijimura Okuyasu yelled. With his attention still focused on Senpai, Higashikata Jousuke called out to him.

'Okuyasu! I found him!'

She wasn't sure of the details, but it sounded like Jousuke was informing him that he had found Senpai. The two delinquents, Higashikata Jousuke and Nijimura Okuyasu set their gazes on Hasumi-senpai. But Senpai didn't pay the situation any mind. He turned towards Chiho like the two of them didn't even exist.

'Have you ever felt it? The power of a story? A long string of characters can undulate, arrest your heart, and carry it to a far-off place. When you read a novel with real power, it makes you feel like the characters in the story truly exist. The pain and joy of the characters start to feel like your own. Your heart sympathizes with them. Sometimes when the characters in the story suffer an injury or are betrayed by a friend, you the reader also feel a largely physical pain. That is *empathy*. Similar to how a shaman is writing on a charm that jinxes his target's body, an author kills a person with *empathy*.'

While Senpai was performing this monologue, he took a handkerchief out from inside his pocket and started to wipe the wristwatch that had fallen into the water. He was calm and composed as if to say all problems had been solved and all that was left was to go home.

'I haven't actually checked his arms yet, but I'm sure this is the guy,' said Higashikata Jousuke.

Nijimura Okuyasu scratched his head like a bewildered wolf.



'Yeah, he's probably got 'em on his arms, too. But, ya know, he's the fifth guy. We already found four guys inside the school. We peeked into the sports clubs' locker rooms. There were a few of 'em. They all had the exact same shaped red lines on their arms. They all matched down to the number of the lines. So I think there might still be a bunch more of guys like that in the school. I mean we already found four after not a whole lotta searching.'

'...They've all got red scratch marks on their arms?'

Nijimura Okuyasu nodded.

'Hey, I checked out of this conversation a while ago. Can we go home now?'

They didn't reply to Hasumi-senpai at all. Nijimura Okuyasu poked Higashikata Jousuke in the arm. It looked like a signal for them to go back to the school. Higashikata Jousuke clicked his tongue, and after turning back to Senpai for one last moment, started running off towards the school with Nijimura Okuyasu.

Chiho was left alone with Senpai next to the pond, still clueless as to what had just transpired, breathed a sigh of relief. What had saved them was undoubtedly the fact that they were good people in their everyday lives. Kind of like how someone over the age of 30 would might say "faith can make a sardine sacred."

'Senpai, do you know that guy, Higashikata Jousuke-san? He really is something when you see him up close. I mean, like, it was like he had Italy sitting on top of his head...'

'Don't say that in front of him. He'll think you're making fun of his hair.'

With water still dripping down from his sleeves, he tapped the face of his watch with his fingertips and murmured 'It's broken.'

No matter how long they stood there it wasn't going to help anything, so they started walking again. They passed through a shopping district and talked about the events that had just occurred. Higashikata Jousuke had said he was going to get on the bus, so why did he go back to the school? Why did he suddenly glare at Senpai and get so belligerent? The questions had no end.

'Don't worry about it. There's probably just something wrong with his head.'

'Weren't you acting a bit strange, too, Senpai?'

Senpai did not respond. 9 months had now passed since they had met at the Thorn Building. At the end of the 3rd semester, it would be exactly one year. Even after so much time had passed, there was still so much she didn't know about Senpai. But in the exchange that had just happened, there was one thing Senpai had said that she was bothered by.

'I have no proof you washed your hands the last time you went to the bathroom, do I?'

Those were the words Senpai had said to Higashikata Jousuke when he had tried to touch Senpai's arm. And she was sure that the boy that had saved her back when she was in elementary school had said something similar.

'That girl. Take your dirty hands off her. I'll bet you don't even wash them after you pee, do you?'

Though it might be a little hasty to link the two together just because they used the same sort of expression, right? She thought about it a bit, and she decided that maybe any boy might use a phrase like that.

'By the way, are they still investigating that mysterious death?' Hasumi-senpai asked as they stopped by the bakery in the shopping district. The evening sun had already disappeared behind the horizon and it started to get dark around them. A great many people in coats came and went; it was quite busy with the congestion and music around the shop. Chiho shook her head.

'There're tons of bizarre rumors besides that one, though, aren't there? Like that rumor about the rock that moans. Or that road that's not on any map.'

'Those sound more interesting than a mysterious death. This town really has a lot of bizarre places, doesn't it?'

They bought their usual doughnuts at the bakery. Their toric shape was philosophical. It was the exact opposite of Higashikata Jousuke's hairstyle and a very feminine shape, she thought as she bit into it. On their way, they reached a three-forked road where Chiho split up with Senpai and returned to her home.

She sat down on her living room sofa and her family poured her some warm coffee.

"Orikasa Hanae."

She thought about the newspaper article that had that name printed in it.

She still kept a clipping of the article in her house.

She continued to pretend to not know anything.

As long as he didn't say anything, she had decided to keep silent herself.

But Chiho had caught on to several facts.

Including the fact that he was fixated on the Oriokasa Hanae incident.

He normally pretended that he didn't care about it, but whenever her name was mentioned, it was clear he was flustered.

But she wouldn't say it out loud. She wanted to preserve their current relationship.

---5---

She made a mark on the concrete wall with a sharp rock. This was the seventh time. It meant that seven days had gone by since she had fallen from the roof. The outside world should be entering the month of August now. The temperature in Morioh was going up and the space Akari was stuck in was sweltering. The moisture in the mud below her was evaporating, making her feel gross from the humidity.

There was trash scattered all over that had been thrown down from the roof just as she had been. They were only things like scraps of cardboard and the broken frames of umbrellas. A banner from a supermarket was caught in the pipes as well, perhaps blown down to where she was by the wind. She tried putting all those things together to make a tent, but she couldn't fit her entire body in it; it was only big enough to stick her head under it while she was lying down. Still, compared to having nothing between her and the sky above her, it was a much more comfortable position to sleep in. She couldn't bathe, but there was bottled water among the things Oogami Teruhiko had thrown down to her, so she was able to use that to wash her face.

Next to the jungle of tangled pipes there was a storm drain which she used as a toilet. There was a metal lattice that she couldn't have even fit her hand in without taking it off. Looking down it, she could see about 2 meters of darkness. It seemed to be connected to a sewer as there was water running at the bottom. When she got her face up close to it, it smelled awful. She couldn't really use it for anything besides relieving herself and throwing away garbage.

She killed time by listening hard to the sounds of the hustle and bustle of far-off people. She couldn't help but feel a bout of joy whenever she would hear the occasional fragment of a conversation.

Around noon, when Akari was examining the condition of her throat, she heard the sound of a cat nearby. Rubbing against the wall of the bank building, there stood a cat. It was wearing a red collar and had light-brown fur. It had a confused look on its face as if it were wondering 'What's a human doing here?' But it immediately turned around and went off into the narrow space between the multi-tenant building and the bank. This was a space of just 15 centimeters, a space so tight that for a human, it might as well have been completely closed. But for a cat, it was one of innumerable passageways.

She tried to yell 'wait!' but couldn't. Her tongue wasn't moving normally and with her throat horribly burned from the drug, all she managed to get out was a wheezing sound. She pressed her face against the space the cat had disappeared through and stretched her hand in, but she could only reach up to her shoulder. An alley far narrower than the one Akari was in stretched on and on. Down it was the side of another building. She saw the cat's behind turn into a narrow corner between the buildings before it went out of sight.

Night fell, and the usual plastic shopping bag was thrown down to her. In addition to food items like bottled water, rice balls, and candy, it also contained a felt-tip pen and a notepad. It was too dark to see, but by sense of touch she could tell that's what they were.

'The thing that makes humans human is language. I'm giving that to you. Even if you won't say the magic words, you should at least be able to write them down in a notepad. Relax, in around two weeks you should at least become able to moan.'

Oogami's voice came down from the roof. His shadow was visible in the opening between the buildings with the moon shining behind him. He wasn't lit up by a flashlight anymore; probably because if he had light shining on him on the roof in the middle of the night, it would be more likely for someone to see him. She didn't know what sort of trick he was using to get into the building every night, but she suspected that he was giving a substantial sum of money to the security guards.

When she drank the water with the drugs in it, she thought she was going to die. But that water wasn't meant to kill; he merely gave it to her to ruin her throat. It seemed that when the drug dissolved it would react with the digestive enzymes in her saliva and generate heat, but then her stomach acid would neutralize it, making it harmless.

'I had the drug adjusted so it wouldn't kill you, but there was still a possibility it would dissolve all your organs, so consider yourself lucky. And of course, the fact that you're still alive is a great blessing for me as well.'

Even if he had not taken her voice from her, she had no intention of screaming. Though he probably would not have believed that. He could not have thought the threat of harming her parents would keep working forever.

'I've said it many times now, but there is only one thing little old you needs to do get out of the gap between these giant walls. I know it may be hard to write while it's so dark, but once you write those magic words in that notepad, leave somewhere I can see it. I'll let down a fishing line and a hook to retrieve it.'

He still hadn't realized where the bag with 50 million yen was.

'That reminds me. I have news that I think you will be happy to hear. Your parents visited the company. They were worried because they weren't able to get in contact with their daughter. I partook in conversation with them. Since you and I are supposed to be friends, I encouraged them. "Your daughter is surely just off on a trip. I'm sure she'll be back soon. There's no need to worry," I said to them. I gave them emotional support. Your very own mother grasped my hands tightly and thanked me. She said 'thank you' again and again with tears rolling down her face. I wanted to tell them, "Your daughter is actually right next to this company, actually. She's on her hands and knees covered in mud like a dying stray dog." Though your mother's hands were fat, cracked, and rather cudgel-like. Honestly, I shivered when those hands grabbed mine. I suppose that's the result of working in fields.'

She had thought about introducing her mother and father to him, but Oogami had asked her to keep him a secret from them just a little longer. That was probably because if she had told her parents his name, then he would have drawn suspicion from someone. Or if she were living with her mother and father, they would have found out about him.

Akari wondered if her mother and father went to her room in their search for her. There were lots of things in her room that would show a connection to Oogami, but that evidence was probably already gone. She had given Oogami Teruhiko a spare key to her room. In fact, he could've done something like put a pamphlet for a long trip on her desk. Her mother and father could have seen that and assumed she went on some trip far away even though she was right there in the very same town as them.

The next day, she first checked that Oogami was not on the roof, and then, using the umbrella and piece of a tent as a makeshift shelter, she wrote a letter.

'...While he hasn't gotten the location of the money out of me, I don't think he'll kill me. He's said that if I call for help, he'll harm my mother and father. Please contact the police without letting him find out about it...'

She wrote as many details as she could about her current status, the place she was confined to, and the man named Oogami Teruhiko. The notepad he had thrown down to her was only the size of her palm, so she used several of the sheets. If she could make contact with the outside world without Oogami Teruhiko finding out, she should be able to find rescue. The problem was *how* she would get that letter to the outside.

One way was to ball up the letters and stick her arm out through a gap in the pipes, and throw them to try to get them through. If she was lucky, they would reach the outside and someone passing by would pick them up. But she tested the theory out with lots of balled-up scrap papers, and not only were there far too many pipes, air conditioner outdoor units, and other obstacles in the way, the distance was also much too far. She tried turning them into paper airplanes to make them fly through, but to no avail. They always knocked into something part-way through, lost speed, and hit the ground. She gave up on finding any way to throw the letters to get them through to the other side.

She thought of putting the letters in an empty water bottle and dropping it down the storm drain she had been using as a toilet. Maybe it would eventually make its way to the ocean and someone would read it. But the diameter of the glass bottle was clearly too big to fit in the gaps in the grating covering the drain, and she couldn't fold or flatten the glass bottle to make it thin enough to get through. Without some kind of ability to make things softer, a bottle with letters in it was not going to float all the way to the ocean.

Was there no way to get the letters to the outside? No, there was one way left. Akari held the letters tight and went to sleep. She had no idea when that chance would

come. Also, she made sure to always leave a little bit of food left over. She saved away just a small piece of the sausage that had been thrown down to her. She had hoped that, when that light brown cat came back, she might be able to gain its affection if she had some food to share.

That cat that had made its way through the narrow gaps in the buildings to where she was had been wearing a collar, meaning someone was taking care of it. If she was able to fasten her letters to the cat's collar, the cat should deliver the letters to its owner.

Akari was resolute. She was not going to beg that man for her life. She was going to get out of her to her freedom. Someday, she would feel the morning sun on her whole body and fill her lungs with the wind of Morioh.



---6---

Once, he caught the flu. The memories of when it happened were into text and stored in his leather-bound book, but he would never look at those pages again. That is because those memories were stored in a "forbidden section." He had personally setup several "forbidden sections" within which he stored his negative memories. If he accidentally read from one of those sections, memories of painful experiences would flood into his head. So while he didn't purposefully go to re-read the memories about when he almost died from the flu, he would have a vague recollection of it being an unpleasant time even if he didn't open the book.

To Takuma, there was a clear difference between a memory and a recollection. The difference was the storage location.

Memories were stored as printed characters in the leather-bound book. Information he'd perceived would be retrieved perfectly unaltered by any emotions. It was like a notebook outside of his body that linked to his own brain and listed information on each individual human experience that made him up.

Recollections were more like impressions left in his heart, rather than actual information. A melding of a watercolor-like sketches and emotion. The storage location for that was in his chest.

Memories and recollections affect each other. That's because the emotions and recollections in his heart are also recorded in the leather-bound book. On the other hand, re-reading parts of the book would bring about new emotions and recollections. This loop would keep repeating as long as he lived.

He put his arms through the sleeves of his school uniform and as he left the house, his body was unsteady. But compared to the recollection of the flu he had when he was 12, he decided this cold was nothing to complain about. Ever since he'd caught a cold on Friday, his body had been sluggish. Takuma bought an envelope at the Sun Mart and then started coughing as he walked. Around where the shopping district ended was Morioh's municipal library, the Thorn Building. It had a front gate made of black bars that gave off a solemnity reminiscent of an ancient foreign castle and was wrapped in thorny vines.

He received a phone call from Futaba Chiho in the afternoon.

'Has that cold still not gone away? Have you gone to the hospital? I'm sure they would have just the spot for you there, Senpai, why don't you go? They should be able to cure your cold, I would think. Well, not that I'm a doctor or anything.'

They decided to meet at 4PM that afternoon and she hung up.

The Thorn Building had Western-style pointed roofs, on which were seven spires along with one octagonal dome. He sat down in the back of the first floor past the entrance lobby with black floorboards and the recognizable faces of the staff. There was still quite a while until 4 o'clock, so he thought he'd get some schoolwork done until Chiho arrived.

He took out the envelope he purchased earlier and wrote 'To Higashikata Jousuke-sama' on it. He'd gained the ability to imitate other people's handwriting so it would be difficult for anyone to tell that he was the one who had written it.

Four days had passed since he'd encountered Higashikata Jousuke at that roundabout and he hadn't been stopped by Jousuke or his comrades since then.

They had looked perplexed, which was a sensible reaction as they were looking for a student that had red scars on their arms and they had found over 30 students like that in the school. They probably had no idea how things had gotten like this.

But he couldn't relax. Higashikata Jousuke was drastically different from the other delinquents at that school. That was the face of knowing what he should use his ability for.

He called out his leather-bound book and tore out a page. It was a "forbidden section" page. While making sure he hadn't had the wrong cover or accidentally read the page, he placed it in the envelope addressed to Higashikata Jousuke. After he sealed it, he had to put it in his pocket and take it with him. That's because if the envelope went further than 30 meters from his body, the page inside it would disappear. He didn't know why exactly, it was just one of the qualities of the leather-bound book.

He'd done experiments on this before. He'd leave the leather-bound book on desks or on the floor, go into the next room, and then come back. Generally speaking, the book would just be in the same state it he'd left it in. However, when Takuma's body was over 30 meters from it, the book would have disappeared when he returned to the room. However, the book wouldn't be totally gone from the world. If he focused, the book would appear in the palm of his hand again. It seemed that the leather-bound book could only exist within a sphere with a 30-meter radius extending out from Takuma's body. Still, that was plenty enough distance for him.

He just had to put the envelope in Jousuke's house then wait right next to it until Jousuke opened the envelope. He couldn't do something like what he'd done with Orikasa Hanae when she bled out and died because Jousuke's family would likely call the police. Therefore, he would have to finish the task with his own hand.

It was quiet inside the library, so when Takuma coughed it echoed across the ceiling and the bookcases. Futaba Chiho arrived long before the arranged time.

Chiho was wearing a scarf and gloves. It wasn't actually snowing, but it was cloudy as usual. After passing the shopping district and the train station, she saw the lines of headstones in the graveyard. Next to the graveyard was an Italian restaurant which had an exterior that looked like it was remodeled like a foreign house. That seemed to be the place she wanted to show him around. She stopped in front of the shop.

'I heard that if you eat here, all the parts of your body in bad health will improve. I'm sure it'll cure your cold, too, Senpai.'

The entrance had 'TRATTORIA/Trussardi' written on it. He searched the leather-bound book for those words and the sounds they made.

There were 0 hits of visual information.

And there was 1 hit of audio information.

He had once heard the name of that shop with his ears. On an autumn day last year, he had heard a girl say the shop name 'Trussardi'. At the time, he didn't take any notice of it because of the background noise, but now he tried to focus on their conversation again. The characters printed in the leather-bound book are compressed time from the past. The image of that noisy classroom surfaced in Takuma's head. What he overheard in the girls' conversation was hard to believe.

Apparently, someone with inoperable cancer had had a meal there and the next day, their x-rays showed that all traces of a tumor had disappeared.

'Okay. That sounds interesting. And I get the feeling that unless I rest someplace, I think this cold is gonna get so bad I'll keel over.'

They looked at the info board next to the entrance. It read: "Today's cooking - Depends on the Customer - Starting at 3,500 yen." As they entered the shop, the only tables they saw were two round ones. It had a nice interior design with a good atmosphere, but there wasn't a single customer. He and Chiho looked at each other and then sat down at one of the tables. An Italian chef came and greeted them. He stared fixedly at Takuma and Chiho's hands, looked deeply into their eyes, then checked the colors of their lips and how chapped they were and nodded.

'Understood.'

He uttered that one word, poured water into their cups, and returned to the kitchen. They weren't sure what it was he understood, but apparently the way this restaurant worked was he just decided the course on his own without showing the customers any menus. The shop had the heat on, but Takuma's cold had gotten a lot worse from walking around outside. He had a chill and had started to get dizzy. It was at the point where he was considering staying in there even if he didn't like the cooking.

He sipped the water in his cup and was amazed at how good it tasted. According to the stories Chiho had heard, it was special water that would clear away any dirt from the eyes. Supposedly anyone who's low on sleep that drinks it would have all waste products in their eyes expelled through tears. So it looked like this shop used healthy ingredients with the goal of improving its customer's physicality.

'I hope he doesn't bring out any dishes that are low in salt content. That would be really unsatisfying.'

Every part of Chiho's body was thin enough to fit through a doughnut hole, but she tended to eat more than average.

In the end, it seemed that her worries were baseless. The courses flowed out of the kitchen one after another and every one of them was delicious. The appetizers, the pastas, the main dishes; they were each personalized to suit Takuma and Chiho. And

with every bite Chiho took, she said 'This is soooo good'. There were times when they took their first slurp of soup and suddenly felt upset, then dissolved into a panic, and started muttering things like they'd lost their minds.

'Man, I wish this stuff came out of faucets...'

As they ate the food, a strange phenomenon occurred. It happened when Takuma was eating the starter salad. When he bit into the herbs sprinkled on it, a strong scent burst out of it. The scent permeated from deep into his throat to his nasal cavity, stimulating his mucous membranes. Takuma let out an enormous sneeze, expelling a huge amount of snot. It was like all the contents of his head had just come out. And with that, the stuffed nose that had been bothering him for days disappeared. His breathing relaxed and he was able to inhale a full breath of fresh air in through his nose.

'GEHUH.'

After Chiho ate her pasta, she suddenly let out a strange cough. This odd-textured pasta seemed to have stuck to the back of her throat. As she coughed painfully and violently, she seemed to be straining herself quite a bit as the area around the base of her neck turned red. Before long, she swallowed the pasta and when her coughing died down, she touched her shoulder with a puzzled expression on her face. When she pressed on her shoulder with her finger, it went limp and creepily sank in.

'The stiffness in my shoulders went away. They were sooo stiff before, but after all that coughing, I think my muscles might've relaxed...'

Takuma's main dish was a stewed beef dish. When he put the meat in his mouth and bit into it, the savory taste melted into the sauce and spread over the surface of his tongue. That flavor was converted into an electrical signal, sparked across his nerve endings, and shook his brain. When the last bit of it settled in his stomach, there was a sudden change. Perhaps as a result of a chemical reaction to the pulverized meat and sauce, the inside of his stomach became tinged with heat. Then, it turned into a ferocious heat like a ball of magma had been placed in his stomach. If he didn't vomit it out, he would die. Just as that thought crossed his mind, he felt the heat being absorbed by his stomach, then going down his blood vessels and spreading throughout his body. A peaceful feeling of arms enveloping his body spread around it as all his chills went away and all his cold symptoms disappeared.

The only dish left was dessert. While they waited for the plates to be brought to them, Takuma talked to Chiho. Her cheeks were dyed pink and she looked so happy that steam was coming out the top of her head.

'I wanna go back in time just so we can redo everything from the moment we came into this shop,' she said, mournfully.

'Well, you can just think back to when you were eating, can't you?'

'Yeah, but thinking back to it won't make my belly bulge.'

'Is that normal?'

'What, does it work differently for you, Senpai?'

Whenever he placed food in his mouth, the taste information of the cooking would be preserved in the leather-bound book. Then he could just go re-read the record the same way you would reheat leftover food in a microwave. The taste would spread across his tongue like he'd just eaten a bite of the exact same food.

'It's probably just a hallucination caused by nerve stimuli. But I feel full just by tracing back my memory.'

'Like taking a trip into the past? That sounds nice. I'd like to hallucinate so I can taste that again.' Chiho said, seeming envious. She would've needed to physically manifest a book in order to do that, but apparently she didn't mind just imagining that feeling of being full.

When he read through the descriptions in his leather-bound book, he really did get a sensation like his mind, and just his mind, was going back in time. A string of symbols in a row would suddenly arrest his consciousness and carry it to the mind of his past-self experiencing something in the past. When that happened, he experienced his past consciousness, and additionally he would experience another consciousness looking on the events with a bird's eye view. It was like a form of time travel where he left his body behind.

'Heh. Time travel. Sounds like something out of a dream.'

'There might be somebody out there with a superpower like that.'

He couldn't say for certain that there wasn't someone out there that had the ability to go the past or the future.

'If somebody with that kind of ability went into the past, it might be possible for them to meet their past self. They might even happen to save their childhood self that had nearly lost their life on a snowy night.'

For dessert, the two of them had a Tiramisu. One spoonful of it gave them a mellow, velvety feeling on their tongues. When they were done, they realized that their skin had become moist and smooth.

When they left the restaurant, it had gotten dark outside. Chiho had been worrying if all her novel-writing had been the cause of her stiff shoulders, but now that her shoulders were loose she was walking with a spring in her step. The dishes at that restaurant really did seem to improve their physical condition. The two of them thought about what kind of trick there might've been, but they couldn't figure anything out.

'I got a letter from my mom. She's doing well, apparently,' said Chiho as they walked around a deserted housing district.

'What's her new spouse do for a living?'

'He's a farm manager.'

'That's a surprising choice.'

He'd heard from her about her parents' divorce. It sounded like there was a slew of reasons her mother would want a new household.

The outdoor lamps dotted all over the street lit up green lawns, a blue doghouse, and a red bicycle. Futaba Chiho went quiet, so he simply walked next to her in silence.

He only ever spent a moderate amount of time hanging out with the people in his class and maintained a balance of putting a distance between himself and anyone he started to get close to. But Futaba Chiho was special. His relationship with her was always in a suspended state. It was a problem much more complicated and abstruse than killing Higashikata Jousuke, Hirose Kouichi and the others.

As they walked silently down the street, they turned a corner and almost bumped into a man they didn't recognize. The man was using a cell phone, so he took a moment longer to notice and was not able to move out of the way in time, bumping shoulders with them. The man made a small sound and his cell phone fell to the ground.

'Sorry,' said Takuma, trying to apologize and move on. But then he heard a call from behind him.

'Hold it right there, dammit!'

Turning back, he saw the man pick up his phone and glare at him as he started operating it.

'Sorry my ass! Look! No matter what I do, this thing won't respond! You just busted it!'

Under the light of the outdoor lamps, Takuma got a better look at the man. He had facial features not unlike that of a troglodyte. He had a brawny physique and wore boorish clothing. Adorned on his fat finger was a creepy looking angel ornament.

Next to the stiff-faced Chiho, Takuma lowered his head.



'I'm honesty really sorry. I'll reflect on my actions. As for your cell phone, let me think; if you have a warrantee, you should be able to go get it repaired.'

'Fuck off. What's with that face? You're glarin' right at me. You think I'm stupid or somethin'?' yelled the man in a frenzy. It seemed that Takuma had glared at the man without realizing it. He had been bullied by delinquents like these since he was little.

'...No, I honestly do feel bad about it. Please forgive me.'

This time he tried apologizing with a bit more of an 'asking for forgiveness' kind of look on his face. But it didn't seem to quell the man's mood. He suddenly went to punch Takuma's left cheek. Takuma could have dodged it, but he decided it would be better to let himself get hit.

Behind him, Chiho let out a short yelp. Pain coursed through his cheek. It seemed that the man's ring had torn through Takuma's skin. When he put his hand to his cheek, he felt something wet. In the light of the outdoor lamps, the blood on his fingers shone red.

'Does that hurt, you shitty little brat? Ya think a warranty's gonna fix that gash on your cheek? See what I'm sayin'?! A warranty's not some perfect thing that'll just fix everything! Only way I'm letting you off the hook is if you pay me the money for a new phone, got it?!'

Chiho came close to him with a worried look on her face, so he thought he'd try to calm her down.

'Hey, what's that face? Are you worried? Wait over there, I've got something to say to this troglodyte.'

As he tried to move away from her, the man cut in like he was replying to what Takuma said.

'The fuck did you just say...?'

'Hey, hold on. It at least looks like you can understand human speech, so you *should* know that interrupting people is bad manners. Calm down and let me talk to her. As soon as I'm done, I promise I'll listen to what you have to say. Or, what, are you in a hurry? Gotta hop a boat home to the jungle right after this?'

When he said that, the blood vessels in the man's temple bulged out, making his face look like a tectonic deformation.

'Oh dear. It seems I've made you mad. I honestly hadn't the slightest intention of doing so.'

He thought of the leather-bound book in his mind. The book appeared from his palm and he felt its weight gently plop onto his hand. As a child, he'd believed it to have appeared so he could organize his out-of-control memories. But wasn't it actually the other way around? Wasn't it because he had this ability lying dormant in him that he was able to remember everything to begin with?

The man went to punch Takuma, seemingly aiming for the right cheek this time. 'What a slow punch,' thought Takuma as he watched the fist careen towards him. His

leather-bound book would be faster. He flipped through the pages and found the passage he was looking for with plenty of time to spare.

The book had rules. You always had to flip through the pages from the present to the past, so descriptions of events that had only just happened could be opened to in an instant.

Just before the man's fist had reached Takuma's right cheek, a loud bang rang out around the residential district and the man's left cheek split open right before his eyes. A gash in his skin opened with a *shhhrt* sound and splash of blood scattered through the air. The man put his hand on his left cheek and made an expression like he had no idea what had just happened.

'If it weren't for that angel ring you're wearing, it wouldn't have broken the skin and made a wound like that. You'll get a better idea once you go home and look in the mirror, but it's the exact same gash you made on my face. That pain from being punched is what you made me feel. You just "relived" my "experience."'

The man made a creeped-out face and backed away from Takuma.

'What's wrong? Are you weirded out by the fact that you've hurt plenty of people the same way before, but this guy here doesn't seem afraid? Hey, don't back away. I remember that birthmark on your face. It was on a poster at the police box. You look just like one of the police sketches on a wanted poster there. Were you perhaps involved in a robbery 5 years ago?'

He searched the leather-bound book for the man's face. When he checked to see if the man's face had ever entered his vision, he found that a very similar face was drawn on a police poster. The date and location of the event was on the poster along with the police sketch so when he read it aloud the man's face, he went pale.

'The wanted poster with your face on it got taken down a little while ago, huh? So that's why you're able to loiter around here worry-free?'

'...Are you gonna report me?'

'No. So get away from me already.'

'I ain't believing that. You're planning on calling the police, aren't ya?'

The man took a knife out of his coat pocket. It was a small, pocket-sized blade. 'Give me a break,' thought Takuma.

Chiho put her back against the fence of one of the properties and made a face like she was trying to hide how scared she was. She didn't cry or scream, but she stared at Takuma with teary eyes. Her light-brown irises looked pretty illuminated by the outdoor lights.

'It'll be all over for me if you call. Please, don't tell anybody about me.'

The man readied his knife. The silver point trembled slightly. The man made an expression showing he was clearly not in his right mind. The kind that made you think that no matter what words you said to him, you would only get the thrust of a blade as a reply.

Takuma had already resigned himself. Not to the man in front of his eyes, but to something drastic that he couldn't resist doing.

The man thrust his knife forward. At that moment, Takuma kicked the man's hand upwards. The knife flew high in the air, drawing a silver trail with its trajectory. Takuma caught it between his middle and pointer fingers right where it fell. He spun the knife around and grabbed the hilt the same way that he would when he would spin pens with his fingers during tests. The man probably couldn't even tell what had just happened. With a few quick swishes, Takuma stroked the knife along the man's face like he would spread cream on a sponge cake.

'I'm giving this back. After I do, please remember what just happened as you pick it up and leave. If you go to a hospital now, they might be able to reattach them.'

He handed the knife over to the man. At that point, the man was still standing stock-still, staring at Takuma's face. Not until after Takuma pulled Chiho's hand and started walking away did several things finally detach from his face and plunk down onto the ground. The man fell to his knees, pressed his hands into his face, and let out a moan. A large volume of foaming blood leaked from between the gaps in his fingers.

They moved around 300 meters and entered the park managed by the town. The park laid right at the border between the residential district and the commercial district. In the afternoons, it was busy with elderly people out on walks and kids playing, but once it grew dark, it became totally deserted. The dark pond was spotted with lights and occasionally the sound of a fish splashing would echo through the air.

Chiho stopped atop a small bridge. A strong pond smell hung over the area. Breathing heavily, she sat down in that spot. Her legs were shaking and the strength seemed to have left them. When Takuma came over and put his hand on her shoulder, she clung to his leg and spoke through sobs. 'The man with the knife said it. "If you beg for your life, you'll regret it for the rest of your life." The one that saved me back then really was you, Senpai.'

She was crying. Trying to fool her wouldn't work anymore. He'd used a knife in front of this girl, just as he had that day in 1995. He thought she would find out one day, but he didn't think today would be that day.

Takuma crouched next to her and wiped away a tear on her cheek with the tip of his index finger.

'Someday soon, there'll probably come a time when you'll wish you'd never gotten involved with me.'

She looked up to ask a question. Takuma's face was reflected in her red-tinged eyes. There was no doubt she'd gotten that light-brown color from her mother.

'Eventually, you'll understand. You'll regret everything back to the moment you were born.'

He heard the sound of a fish splashing. He saw a ripple spread across the dark water's surface and disappear.

He was alive just to push one man into despair. The man's name was Oogami Teruhiko. He had gotten married 17 years earlier and changed his last name. He now had one daughter. Her name was Chiho. And now, she was in his arms.

---7---

Later on, Jousuke-kun explained it to me, and I learned the details for the first time.

The house Jousuke-kun and his family lived in was a stand-alone Western-style house found in a quiet housing district. He lived alone with his mother there and I'd visited the house many times. Every time, Jousuke-kun's mom asked me, 'How's your relationship with Yukako-san going?' Jousuke-kun's mom was really young; definitely not someone you'd expect to have a son in his first year of high school.

That evening, Jousuke-kun's mom put a tea kettle on her gas stove to boil some water. As the blue flame started to heat the kettle up, a *clang-clang-clang* sound started to echo as the metal tensed up.

The front door bell rang, and Jousuke-kun's mom went to answer it. But when she opened the door, there was no sign of anyone outside. "Maybe the bell was broken?" she thought. Just as she was about to go back inside to stop shivering from the winter cold, she realized that there was an envelope at her feet.

'To Higashikata Jousuke-sama," read the addressee line.

'Envelope for you,' Jousuke-kun's mom said, holding the envelope. But Jousuke-kun couldn't pry his hands off of what he was doing. He was about to set a best-time on a racing game he'd bought a few days ago.

'A letter? From who?'

The letter didn't even have a stamp or postmark on it. Apparently, it had been delivered directly to the door.

'It might be an ad or something. Like somebody selling school uniforms.'

'Check what's in it for me.'

'You're ok if I open it, then?'

'Yeah.'

Using the game controller, Jousuke-kun made the car in on the display do a drift. As the scenery flew by at high speed, the car turned the corner, making sparks fly out. Jousuke-kun heard the sound of an envelope being opened behind him.

'It doesn't look like there's anything in it at all...'

The car Jousuke-kun was controlling collided with another car, making his rear wheels slip. The kettle let out a whistling sound. The water had come to a boil and steam had begun to forcefully flow out of it.

'Oh, looks like the water's boiling,' Jousuke-kun said to his mother who should have been standing right behind him. But she didn't reply and he didn't hear the sound of her walking over to turn the flame off. The kettle just let out a higher pitch like it was going crazy. All of that seemed odd to Jousuke-kun, so he turned around. There was a puddle of blood spreading out on the floor. On the display, the car lost control, hit a wall, and got wrecked. Jousuke-kun's mom was lying on the ground and had lost consciousness due to severe blood loss. Blood was spewing like a fountain out of gashes that had opened on both of her arms. He said they were like wounds that had been inflicted by a scissor or something in order to commit suicide.

---8---

She had a dream. It was a memory of when shed taken a trip overseas with him.

'I found a nice little antique shop down the alleyway,' Oogami Teruhiko said. He said it was a small shop run by one elderly man and didn't seem to have a single souvenir that looked like it had been made in a factory to sell to tourists there.

'I found a beautiful necklace on one of the shelves further in. Just when I picked it up to buy it for you, I carelessly bumped into the shelf behind me...'

He explained how the merchandise that had been stocked on the shelves had fallen on top of him, giving him a cut on his shoulder.

'Types of ironware fell all over the floor. Among them all, there was one with a sharp point with a slight amount of blood on it. It was something like an arrowhead, but the crack that had formed in it had warped it quite a bit. The shopkeeper said it was probably just some failed creative work that someone had thrown out.'

The pain from the cut on his shoulder got worse as time went on. Once he got back to the hotel, he was so nauseous he couldn't even walk. Maybe the cut had gotten infected. His shoulder had swollen to the point it looked like he had a ripe, red tomato stuck to him, and on top of that he had developed a fever.

'I can't believe how careless I was. I've ruined our vacation...' He said, lying down on the bed. Outside the hotel's windows, they could see the Western European town dyed in red by the sunset.

'Don't worry. I'm sure you'll feel better by tomorrow.'

Akari grasped Oogami Teruhiko's hand.

He put his other hand under his pillow and pulled out a necklace. He had apparently bought it at the antique shop, and at the end of the silver chain was a round jewel that looked like a scarab. The jewel was a shiny black stone which, according to him, was made of a fossilized tree. It was lightweight, could be electrically charged through friction, and apparently long ago people had believed that it contained magic. Really, she couldn't blame them. Its beautiful black color looked like the night compressed into a stone.

That cut on Oogami Teruhiko's shoulder would become a bruise that would stay there forever. It was a bruise shaped like a horse. It was like the germs that had been on the arrowhead had entered his body and seemingly took up residence there in his shoulder.

When she woke up, he oriented herself with her surroundings. Under a small ceiling she had made from an umbrella frame and a piece of cloth, she was lying on the ground with her body curled into a ball.

It was already past daybreak, but the gap between the buildings was dreary. As she got up, bits of dirt dropped from between her hair. She didn't have a mirror so she couldn't make sure, but her face was probably starting to look awful with bits of dried mud stuck to it. She made a mark on the wall and looked around her. The ground between the buildings was warm, soft, and muddy. There was no sign of any cat paw prints. It looks like one hadn't come around when she was sleeping, either.

Time ticked on without any changes. She felt like her own life was being whittled away a little at a time. To try to draw out a cat, she always left a small amount of food out. One day, she suddenly noticed a rat chowing down on it. It was a creepy rat covered in filth that would make anyone back away if they were glared at by it. She'd been creeped out by these animals since she was little, to the point where she'd always change the channel whenever she'd see one on TV. Scared and unable to shoo it away, all she could do now was stand there and watch as it put the food in its mouth and ran away into the storm drain.

Maybe the rat had worked out that it would be able to find food between the two buildings? It visited at a rate of once every three days. She figured out it was coming out through the storm drain, so she took scraps of cardboard, used them to cover the lattice storm drain, and weighed them down with mud. But the rat opened a hole in the cardboard and dug up the dirt. While she was sleeping she felt something tickle her feet and the nape of her neck, making her bolt upright, only to find that the rat's filthy tail had been touching her skin.

Every night, Oogami came to the roof. He would talk to her, but Akari would completely ignore him. She wanted some tool she could use to kill the rat, but she had no intentions of asking him for anything.

While she was sleeping, he dropped an armful-sized box down, making a huge noise that made her bolt upright. She thought it might be another trap, so she waited until dawn before carefully checking the contents of the box.

There was a towel blanket, a mirror, soap, a vinyl sheet, and biscuits that were some years past their best-if-eaten-by date on it. Also, Oogami Teruhiko had connected a hose to a water supply on the roof, so she would always have water flowing down the wall. It was just a trickle, but now she could wet her throat and rinse her body as much as she wanted without having to worry about running out of water.

This wasn't Oogami being kind. He dropped these supplies down because he didn't have any other choice. He had to keep Akari alive. He couldn't let her get sick or lose her sanity, either. In order to keep her in a state where she could write the location of the money in the notebook, there was a need to manage her mental and physical health. But at the same time, he probably expected it to be a war of attrition. She'd already drawn over 15 lines on the wall.

Everything was precious. she never even through empty bottles away, just in case she could use them for something later. She even made special care to preserve the cardboard box the supplies had come in. She looked at her face in the mirror and tears started to well up in her eyes. She rinsed her face with the water trickling down the wall. She was a human, she told herself. But when she tried to use human speech, the horrible burning on her tongue and throat made it so she could only make a *uuuh uuuh* sound. However, she was definitely a conscious, thinking human being. She had a human mother and father and she had a name, which was Hirai Akari. She decided that starting now, she would look at herself hundreds of times in the mirror every day and look at her face. She started with arranging her hair. The hair she saw in the mirror was dried out and dirty.

Using the vinyl sheet from the supply box, she made a roof to cover her from the rain. This wouldn't be like before, when all she could do was cover her face when she was sleeping. This was a ceiling big enough to cover her entire body. It was pretty flimsy, but wind didn't blow between the buildings so it wouldn't get blown apart.

The water trickling down the wall excessively dampened the ground. To prevent that, she dug a ditch to guide to guide the water to the storm drain. She crushed an empty can to use as a scoop. It lowered the amount of moisture, making it somewhat pleasant.

She didn't see anything she could use to trap the rat, so she ended up spending her days unable to deal with it. And that filth-covered rat looked disgusting every time she saw it.

But no matter how long she waited, the cat never came, which made her uneasy. What if it just happened to get lost here that one day and would never come back again? Or what if it'd been killed by being hit by a car or died of a disease? What if its owner moved away, taking the cat with them? All kinds of possibilities ran through her head. She'd been able to maintain her sanity by clinging to the hope of using the cat to deliver her letter. She spent every day just surviving and thinking about that.

In lieu of a magazine or a newspaper, Oogami dropped down a crossword puzzle book and a book called "Family Medical Dictionary." Apparently he was saying that if she had nothing to do and felt like she was gonna die, she should solve crossword puzzles and if she was feeling sick she'd better figure it out herself. She had no newspaper so she had no idea what was going on in the world.

Once in a while, she could hear classical music coming from outside. Before she'd been pushed between the two buildings, she'd heard rumors at her workplace of an open-terrace cafe being constructed nearby. The music must've been carrying from there. Was that melody Mozart? She could just barely make it out with how muffled it was.

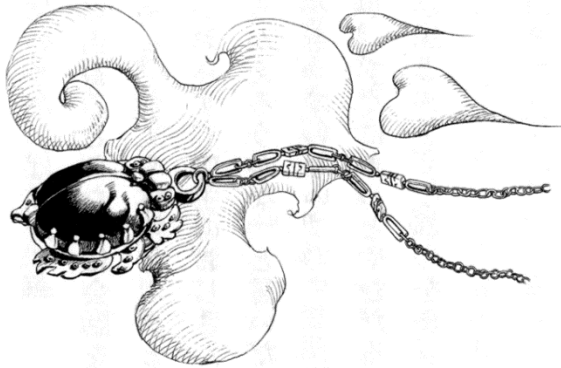
One morning when she woke up, there was a postcard lying next to her. It was unused and new without any stains or dirt on it. It had a picture of a field that stretched all the way to the horizon printed on it. On the grass were two horses pressing against each other. She had no idea if they parent and child, lovers, siblings, or what. The wind must've blown it between the two buildings. She wrapped it in vinyl and kept it safe so it wouldn't get wet.

When she listened to the music from outside and stared at the postcard, she felt like she could climb right into the field printed on it. She felt like the rectangular card in her hands had turned into a window and the picture of a field was swaying in the wind. When she closed her eyes, she saw herself standing barefoot in the field. There, the refreshing scent of grass wafted through the air and the sharp tips of the rustling grass tickled the bottoms of her feet. When the wind blew, it made a wave in the grass draw towards her and then travel off far away. The horses on the grass were bigger than she, and really quite overwhelming when she got close to them. They had lustrous black pelts and when she placed her palm on them, she could feel the gentle movements of their breathing. Until the two horses snorted and ran away, Akari was able to stay in her dream world.

When she opened her eyes, she once again realized the fact that she was stuck in the chasm between two buildings. But she was still able to focus on the fact that she was still alive.

The number of lines on the wall that she drew once each morning grew larger and larger. Even after the number reached over 50, the cat did not come back. Then, one early afternoon when she was listening to music, she realized that she had never used any of the menstrual sanitary products in the items Oogami Teruhiko had thrown down to her. She re-counted all the lines she had drawn on the wall.

Chapter 3



Confutatis

Confutatis maledictis,
flammis acribus addictis,
voca me cum benedictis.

Oro supplex et acclinis,
cor contritum quasi cinis:
gere curam mei finis.

Chapter 3 Confutatis

Confutatis maledictis,
flammis acribus addictis,
voca me cum benedictis.

Oro supplex et acclinis,
cor contritum quasi cinis:
gere curam mei finis.

[TL Note: Confutatis (Confounded) is a Latin hymn describing the day of judgement. This hymn is also part of the Christian Requiem Mass and is a later section of the Dies Irae hymn from earlier (Dies Irae is the name of the whole hymn and also the name of the 1st movement of the sequential/sequence with Confutatis as the 5th movement out of 6). The whole hymn was famously set to music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Originally in Latin, it translates to the following.]

Confounded

When the wicked are confounded,
Doomed to flames of woe unbounded,
Call me with Thy saints surrounded.

Low I kneel, with heart's submission,
See, like ashes, my contrition,
Help me in my last condition.

---1---

There was a small secondhand bookstore in Morioh's shopping district. I'd just seen a friend of mine in my school year was in the shop, so I went in. I made it look like I'd just run into him unexpectedly and started an inoffensive conversation. He talked about things like when he was on cleanup duty at school. Unlike Jousuke-kun and Okuyasu-kun, he was a totally normal boy. He was about the same height and build as me, and wasn't in any school clubs. He and I were the only customers in the store and the owner was holed up in his room past the register. Just when the boy from my year said, 'Well, it's about time I got going,' we heard the sound of rain outside. Unfortunately, neither of us had umbrellas.

'How about we stay inside the shop a little longer? The rain's probably gonna let up soon,' I said to him. As we waited for the sound of the rain to go away, we got into talking about manga and that sort of thing.

'Hirose-kun, do you read novels much?' he asked as he stared at the shelf of old paperbacks.

'Well, once in a while. Not as much as I read manga, I guess. And usually when I do, it's a novelization of a manga I like.'

'You mean like those ones where they just write exactly what happened in the manga but in text form?'

'More like where the characters that appear in it are the same, but story's original.'

'I don't see how that's any different from fan fiction.'

The zaaaa sound of the rain continued. The exit door was closed. The boy from my year took out a book from a high shelf and was starting to flip through it when I looked near his hand. His sleeves had slid down, allowing me to see the red scratch marks on his arm. Wanting to seem like I was just trying to make small talk, I asked him, 'Hey, I just noticed those red marks on your arm, those are scars, right? Where'd that happen?'

'They're wounds I made myself, and it ended up leaving marks,' he answered casually.

'When? And where?'

'Not too long ago, when I was at school. Hm, what classroom was it again? I know I remember being able to see a slide and a swing outside...'

'A slide and a swing? Uh, I don't think there's anything like that at our school.'

'Now that you mention it, yeah... But that's what I remember. Maybe I'm just not remembering it right. Huh. Why did I tear at my arm like that anyhow...?'

He continued flipping through the book with a look on his face like he was thinking. It seemed like his hands were moving totally unconsciously.

'That's strange. It was enough to leave these scars behind but I can't remember the reason...'

He supported the book's spine with his left hand and picked up and turned over each page with his right. The pages fluttered one after another and the number of remaining pages dwindled. The sound of the rain became loud for a moment, then died back down. Someone opened the door and came inside. My friend took a momentary glance towards the entrance before returning to the book.

'Speaking of which, do you know a mangaka called Kishibe Rohan?' I asked. His face lit up.

'Yeah, he's the ultimate mangaka! His work is in fine art territory, if you ask me,' he said as he continued to flip through the pages. He hadn't realized that he'd long since flipped to the last page of the book he was holding. He'd turned all the way to the

copyright info page and even flipped over the back cover. What he was now flipping unconsciously with his right hand was his own left arm. Just when he realized what he was doing and surprised look appeared on his face, I heard a voice from behind me.

'Thank you. I think so myself.'

Kishibe Rohan was standing there. The boy from my year was already unconscious, so I wasn't sure if he had heard what the mangaka said or not. He collapsed on the floor and the impact made the skin on his hands and face peel off all at once. The part he had been flipping was made up of a number of thin, magazine-like pages. It had become more like paper than a part of his body. There was text written on the surface of the pages; his memories and personal profile.

'Sorry I kept you waiting. Today was my deadline. When I picked up the phone, I still had 16 pages that were completely blank.'

Just before I'd gone into the book store, I'd called him by cell phone. I wasn't sure if he'd come or not, given how selfish he is, but it looks like he had an interest in getting the full account of the incident. This was probably so he could eventually use it as material for his manga, too.

'Are you okay with leaving your manuscript unfinished like that?'

'Unfinished? What're you talking about? I got it all finished and just went to drop it off at my publisher.'

Kishibe Rohan bent his slender frame down and rolled up my classmate's sleeve, confirming for himself the red marks on his skin. Just as Kishibe Rohan lifted his arm up, it turned into a loose paper form.

'Nearly 30 students have these same scars. And not just the boys; some girls and teachers, too... We even found some middle school students that have them.'

'I wonder if that phenomenon is part of his Stand ability, too.'

'I seriously doubt they all coincidentally scarred their arms on the same day. There's also no way they all got them without realizing it. I mean, it's winter. Everyone's wearing long sleeves. Even if they did get them all unconsciously, there's no way they could leave a mark like this from outside their clothes. On top of that, I'm sure I checked every one of my classmates' arms during class earlier and I'm also sure that his arms didn't have any scars on his arms back then.'

It had happened just as they were checking the male students for the scars. The culprit definitely realized what we were doing and put some plan into action to stop us. He must've been trying to increase the number of people with the distinctive features he had so he could remain undetected.

'And there's one other really disturbing thing. All of them believe *they* were the ones that scarred their arms...'

Kishibe Rohan looked down at the unconscious boy he'd turned into a book.

'I figure I should check. We might figure something out like we did with the cat. There could be some details on how he got the scars.'

I hated having to do this to a friend from my own year, but we had no other way of getting clues. Kishibe Rohan flipped through the pages of my classmate's face just like he was reading a magazine, and we read his memories that had been turned into text form.

'This boy doesn't seem to be a Stand user, he's just your average, every day boy. In other words, not the culprit we're looking for. Looks like his grades are slightly better than average. Oh, the name of the girl he has a crush on is written here.'

'Please don't look at that sorta thing.'

'You're as much a straight edge as ever. Hmph. Looks like his big hobby is reading. He spends all his free time with his nose in a book. Recently he's been reading a book called *The History of Books* published by Sougensha. Speaking of which, do you know what book has been the most long-time best-seller across all of human history?'

'That must be the Bible, right?'

'I thought I'd mention since we're in a used bookstore. How about some more book trivia? The history of books is actually deeply tied with the Bible. Whenever you look into the origins of books, you always come across talk of the Bible. Long ago, churches published the Bible in order to spread the word of God. No printing machines existed yet, so apparently trainee monks had to transcribe them letter-by-letter. And Gutenberg invented his printing press in order to publish the Bible. The history of books is a history of religious activity. They were able to print Bibles one after another and before long, they covered the Earth.'

'I don't really get religion.'

'It's something you can't get around when you start thinking about civilization. That's because it's connected to government, art, science, everything. Here, take a look at this.'

Kishibe Rohan pointed to the back of my classmate's head. Among all the places where his memories were turned into text, there was one part that stood out. The text was really dense in that one spot. There was small print written between other lines of horizontal text. Sentences were squeezed into the small amount of blank space there. The font was different from the other areas, giving the impression that it had been added in later.

'Scratch, scratch, scratch, scratch, scratch, scratch... My head feels like it's about to explode. I have to do this or I won't be able to take it. Fingernails on my arm. Scratch, scratch, scratch. Cutting into the skin, caught between the fingernails. I've got to cut a hole in my body and let the air out or I'll lose my mind. Everyone's voices are so loud, it's irritating it more and more. I can hear them out the window, coming from over by the swings and the slide. Those shit stains, playing around out there all carefree. I wanna kick the shit out of them. The hands of the clock out in the plaza aren't moving at all. How long is it gonna stay like this? My head feels like it's gonna explode. I need to

make a hole in my body and let the air out. I'll make a cut in my arm to keep from exploding. I need to get the heat and the air out through there. Scratch, scratch, scratch...'

The sound of rain was all that was heard in the quiet bookstore. Kishibe Rohan and I looked at each other.

'This part is insane.'

'It's like someone edited it. Like they forced some other scene into it.'

We both had gut feelings that this section wasn't something the boy from my grade had experienced. That it could be something somebody else wrote in.

'It seems this boy is under the impression that this is really part of his past.'

'So, does that mean the culprit's Stand ability is to fabricate memories? But what was written in here was nothing but a memory, right? Then why does he actually have the scratch marks on his arm?'

A paperback book fell onto the floor. It was the one my classmate had been holding up until a minute ago. Kishibe Rohan looked down at it.

'Have you ever had this feeling? When you're reading a well-written manga or novel and the pain the characters in it are feeling feels like your own? Maybe whatever happened to this boy was something like that. Because the experience just felt so authentic that his body underwent physical effects from what was written in the memory. Also, the body and mind are connected. Like how if a Stand is injured, the Stand user gets injured as well. Perhaps writing words into your mind that injure your body works the same way?'

We were beginning to vaguely understand the nature of the culprit's Stand. If his theory was correct, then Orikasa Hanae must've had a memory of a car crash implanted in her, causing her body to *mistakenly perceive* that it had been in a car crash. That must've been how she suffered major injuries as though she'd been in a car accident with all the furniture in her house left undisturbed.

'By the way, you expressed a minute ago that it was a "memory falsifying ability," but that's not strictly correct. The culprit probably can't make whatever new memories he wants.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Because Orikasa Hanae did not die instantly. She died of blood loss. In other words, she died because she was left in an injured state for a prolonged period of time. Don't you find that odd? Why didn't the culprit just kill her instantly? If he could make these memories and injure his opponents however he wanted, then why doesn't he just plant a memory of a fatal heart attack in them? That would carry less risk. He wouldn't have to worry about someone finding her and saving her life that way. That leads me to believe that the memories he can plant are restricted somehow.'

'Restricted?'

'My guess is that he can only write his *own* memories into his opponents. If that's the case, a lot starts to make sense. Take her not dying instantly, for example. The reason the culprit couldn't plant a memory that could cause his victim instant death is because the culprit *himself* has never experienced instant death.'

'What about the whole thing with the car flying in mid-air? The mark on her left by the bumper is way higher than it should normally be. Almost like she was hit by a car floating in the air.'

Unless he was able to freely create memories by his will, I didn't think it was possible to make that kind of mark. But Kishibe Rohan answered without batting an eye.

'Try thinking about it this way. Maybe the memory of the accident was from when the culprit was a child. At the time the accident happened, maybe his body was really small. That way, it's possible that the mark left by the bumper could have been formed on the right femur near the groin. When he implanted the same experience into Orikasa Hanae, a woman who's at least 169 centimeters tall, it created this odd situation where the bumper mark was made at the same place on her body as his, despite there not being a vehicle with a bumper at that height. The culprit's Stand only lets him implant his own memories. If you think about it that way, it makes a lot of sense, doesn't it?'

Kishibe Rohan took out a pen and started writing on the back of my classmate's face.

'When I wake up, I won't remember anything. I was alone the whole time I was in the bookstore.'

Now, when he wakes up, he shouldn't remember that I had been with him or that he had been turned into a book. While he was at it, Kishibe Rohan drew a line across the text that had been added by the culprit.

'Now those annoying memories should be gone, too. Though I don't know if the scars on his arm will go away, as well.'

'In the way that it can manipulate memories, the culprit's Stand is kind of similar to yours, isn't it, Rohan-sensei...?'

'Speaking of which, there's still one unsolved issue. When the culprit met Orikasa Hanae through the window, why did he take off his school uniform jacket?'

'Well, whatever the reason, it turned out to be good for us, didn't it? Thanks to that, we found out the culprit has scratch marks on his arm. If her pet cat, Trinita, hadn't seen it all happen, we wouldn't really have any clues.'

'Don't you think it's strange? What reason could there have been to roll your sleeves up in the middle of the winter?'

'Maybe just so none of the blood splashed on his jacket or something...?'

'There was a glass window between Orikasa Hanae and the culprit. I don't think he would be worrying about blood splashing. I think that maybe, knowing what the culprit's Stand is, that particular action is an extremely important point. I'm not sure of

the correct answer right now, but if at some point I meet the culprit face to face, this seemingly trivial issue could decide who wins and who loses.'

We both went quiet. The shop was filled with the smell of old books and a calm, quiet feeling like the inside of a temple.

'What's Jousuke up to?' Kishibe Rohan asked me, like he was asking about the weather.

'After what happened, he took off from school for a day. He's still uptight.'

One night last week, Jousuke-kun's mom started bleeding from her arm. Luckily, Jousuke-kun was the first one to find her and, using his Stand, he was able to immediately heal her so perfectly that it didn't even leave any scars. However, the blood she lost wouldn't come back. She needed an emergency blood transfusion, so he brought her to the hospital. Five days had passed and his mom had already been released, but Jousuke-kun still felt uneasy.

'They probably went after him because of that hairstyle.'

Kishibe Rohan let a *hmph* sound out of his nose. He and Jousuke-kun didn't get along. Whenever they met up, there would always be some tension in the air. Now, unless they just happened to pass each other in town, the two never met.

'Maybe he hid his Stand somewhere? Like inside the envelope he sent...?'

Apparently, Jousuke-kun's mom's arm started bleeding and she had collapsed right after she opened an envelope. However, there was nothing actually in the envelope. The envelope itself was a type sold commercially all over, so there were no clues to be found there. All that was written on it was "To Higashikata Jousuke-sama," so we really had no way to identify the culprit.

After she'd received treatment from the hospital and the doctors asked how Jousuke-kun's mom had been injured, she answered like this: 'I compulsively stabbed myself with a scissor.'

I can't imagine what Jousuke-kun felt like after hearing that. Seeing him there with his mouth shut tight, I couldn't find any words to say to him. I'm sure Jousuke-kun would never forgive the culprit for what he did.

'Please, would you erase the memory implanted in Jousuke-kun's mom?'

'Yes, I suppose I should. Even if I'm not a fan of Jousuke. Okay, well I'd better be getting back.'

Now that Kishibe Rohan had rescinded his Heaven's Door ability, the transformed boy from my grade went back to normal. He was asleep, but I knew he should be waking up soon so I decided to leave him alone.

Kishibe Rohan and I left the used book store. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and a pretty sunset stretched over the horizon, making the sound of rain that was only audible around the immediate area of the used bookstore all the more out of place. When people passed by they turned and looked inquiringly as they heard that ZAAAA sound.

'This sound was your doing, Kouichi-kun?'

'You took a while to get here, Rohan-sensei. I had to do something to keep him from leaving.'

A lizard-like tail passed in front of us. It was my Stand, which I had named Echoes.

'I wonder what the culprit's Stand is called or what it looks like,' I said as we were walking. The idea having been on my mind for a while.'

'Called? You know, there's a surprisingly large number of these Stand names that come from Western music.'

'Really?'

'I'm just kidding.'

Echoes canceled the ZAAAA sound and the area suddenly went quiet.

---2---

Though menstrual cycles could stop because of unusual stress, Akari had a hunch that that wasn't what was going on here. Akari wrote this down in her memo pad:

'I'm pregnant. It's your child.'

Late that night, Oogami Teruhiko came to the roof and she raised her voice to get his attention. Her throat still hadn't fully healed, so all she could do was let out a hoarse yell. Still, her intention seemed to get through to him, as a fishing line and fish hook were thrown down to her. She stuck the note on the hook, pulled the line a few times, and he pulled it up and collected the note. She couldn't say she wasn't holding out hope that this would be her ticket out from between the buildings. But he wasn't going to make it that easy.

'Let's give thanks to God. You've been blessed.'

He showed no sign of dropping a ladder or a rope down. She desperately held back begging for her life or crying for help.

She still couldn't yell loud enough for it to reach outside. If her throat did get well enough to be able to scream, she might be able to call someone over from the street outside. She had a human forming inside her now. If she could, she wanted to get out of here as fast as possible and go to the hospital to have surgery. She wanted to get an abortion and erase any fetus that carried some of that man's genes from the world.

Oogami Teruhiko threw down a few books about pregnancy and giving birth as he needed to keep managing Akari's health. According to the books, if it was within the first 11 weeks, then an abortion operation could be done quite easily. If it had been 12 weeks or more, the fetus couldn't be removed in any way besides actual childbirth because of its size.

What started out as just some tiny cells would multiply again and again, expand, and gradually become human-shaped. She wondered where the line between being a piece of meat and a human being was. Either way, if more than 12 weeks passed, she would legally need to report it as a stillbirth when she had the abortion. Maybe at least on paper, that was where the line had been drawn saying it would be another human in her belly. If possible, she wanted to get out of here and rush to the hospital before that point. But that wish did not come true.

As the sultry days settled down, the nights grew colder. Oogami Teruhiko threw down a thick blanket and winter clothing. 12 weeks had passed and she hadn't seen hide nor hair of the cat. Her belly still hadn't swelled much at all, either. But in the past month, she'd noticed various changes in her physicality. She had nausea and had started vomiting into the storm drain frequently. She read the pregnancy books in an attempt to find how to alleviate the morning sickness. 'The symptoms of morning sickness are primarily formed by psychological factors. It is advisable to avoid stress buildup during this period,' it said. She threw the book against the wall in frustration.

One day when she woke up and found that the number of lines she'd drawn on the wall was now over 100, she started thinking about suicide. There were all kinds of ways. She could cut her wrists with a fallen piece of glass, she could tie her clothing onto the plumbing and hang herself, or she could stop eating and starve to death. But when she thought about something like the possibility that the cat could come there any day, she would feel like waiting one more day. She decided that as long as there was the least bit of hope in living, then she would bet on that. As the days dragged on stuck there surviving between the walls, the morning sickness stopped before what felt like all that long. Her body felt stable, like the turbulence on an airplane flight had ended.

One morning, an ugly-faced rat appeared and started messing around with the food in her bag.

From far off, she heard intermittent beautiful music.

She'd had a feeling of stretching in her stomach for a little while now.

But on the inside of her belly, she had started to feel a stirring feeling.

There was something in her body that was moving independent of her own will.

Not something foreign. In fact, the exact opposite.

It was the thing in this world closer to her than anything else.

It was no less than a miracle that happened all over the world. Since antiquity, humans and other animals did this over and over to increase their numbers.

Every time she felt the fetus move, the loneliness of being alone between the buildings waned. She spent every day counting how many times it moved inside her belly over the course of the day. Right now, it was sleeping, but when it woke up it would start moving. She even started realizing things like that.

When she looked at the postcard, she held back tears. She saw the two horses in the field as mother and child. Half of her child's blood belonged to that man. She could never, ever allow that. She had to kill his baby. But at some point, she started leaning away from killing it and leaning more towards keeping it.

Oogami Teruhiko threw down all sorts of things. She was thankful for the clothing for use during pregnancy and for food that was high in nutrients. Then winter arrived and the temperature went down. She then started worrying about whether or not she and the child in her belly would be safe. There was no wind between the buildings, so they were never exposed to chilling winds, but the nights were so cold she thought she might freeze to death. She slept wrapping all the clothing and the many blankets that Oogami had tossed down to around her. The cold water flowing down the side of the building was always flowing so it never froze, but any water she had been storing in bottles turned to ice so she couldn't drink it. She sent a number of notes up asking him to drop down home heaters like electric blankets or oil burners. He didn't provide any home heaters, but he did drop down a portable gas stove along with heating gas, as well as a kettle, down from the roof. For Oogami, it must've been a big decision to give her access to fire. He must've thought about the possibility that she would use the fire to

raise a smoke signal in order to call for help. But she supposed his bigger priority had to be keeping her from freezing to death.

Unlike the boys in the Jules Verne novel *Two Years' Vacation*, her life was being guaranteed to her. She could boil water whenever she wanted using the gas stove and she was able to wash her body with steaming hot water. When she looked in the mirror, she saw her skin had become dry and rough and lost its color and her lips had turned pale. And she couldn't be sure, but she imagined that she smelled awful. She would have to be cleaner from now on. If she got sick, it could threaten the survival of the child in her belly.

She laid cardboard boxes out on the ground and then slept on top of them in a snowman of blankets and clothing. But the sheets weren't pulled taut, so snow piled up on the parts that sagged. Before long, she began to hear Christmas music. Every year, during the Christmas sales in the shopping district, they would always play Jingle Bells and Silent Night. As she imagined the town being covered in decorations and bustling with people, she filled her mouth with water from a cup. This cup was something that had been thrown away between the buildings, so it was actually more of a cracked tea ceremony bowl than a cup, but she pretended it was a cup. She was covered in multiple layers of blankets as she sipped hot water and when she exhaled, her breath turned a cloudy white. Grains of snow drifted slowly down into the gap between the buildings.

Her belly swelled to the point where it looked like she'd swallowed a small watermelon whole. The fetus had started to move vigorously, too. With a cracked voice, she started calling it her child.

'I sure would like to get out of here before you're born, though.'

She still hadn't given up on escaping. She had a letter ready within reach at all times to fasten to the cat's collar. She'd wrapped it in multiple layers of vinyl to keep the letters from getting wet and unreadable from the rain. Plastic shopping bags were one thing she had plenty of, because Oogami always threw down daily commodities like food in Kameyuu Market bags.

It happened one day when she no longer heard Silent Night anymore. She was woken up by the feeling of her child moving. She pulled off the mass of blankets she had on, being careful not to knock over the kettle she had been using as a hot water bottle. The kettle's water would be warm at night, but would cold by morning. Thinking she should boil some water again, she placed the kettle on the portable stove. Just as she was holding her hands out to the fire to warm them, she heard an animal's cry.

A cat was standing just a bit away from her. It had a red collar and brown fur; it was the same cat that had visited this place before. If she moved too fast, she would scare it off. But she absolutely could *not* let it get away. Her pulse quickened. Perhaps noticing this change, the child in her belly started moving restlessly. Staring the cat fixedly in the eyes, she took the leftover sausage from yesterday out of her bag. The cat showed interest in it, and approached to within arm's reach of her. As she timidly

stroked its back, that warmth and softness made something hot well up in her chest. She'd wanted to pet it for so long! However, this cat had something she needed it to do. She needed it to deliver her words to someone.

She slipped her letter under the cat's collar and tied it with string to keep it from falling out. That string was something she'd made herself by tearing up plastic bags.

Just as she let it go, the cat slipped into the gap between the bank and the multi-tenant building. The space was far too small for a human to slip through, being just 15 centimeters. She looked on with her face pressed to the gap until she could no longer see the cat's back.

---3---

A number of chairs and desks were thrown away in the garbage dump behind the school building. They were all deformed into odd shapes. The backs of chairs were in a spiral shape, the tabletops of the desks had spikes on them, each one's legs were tangled in the others', making it all a rather disturbing sight to behold. Chairs and desks had been fused, making them into some new bizarre type of furniture. I had no idea how many of them there were in total. I wouldn't even have known they were chairs and desks if Okuyasu-kun hadn't told me.

'I saw Jousuke carry them out of his class. This's his handiwork.'

An image formed in my head of pissed-off Jousuke beating on desks. The reason the desks and chairs were all warped was because they reformed however Jousuke pictured them in his mind. When he was mad, things he'd destroyed with his Stand got distorted into weird shapes.

I couldn't blame him for being upset, given the fact that we still hadn't found the culprit that was hurting people. The person who had killed Orikasa Hanae was without a doubt the same person that had hurt Jousuke-kun's mom. From what we investigated with Kishibe Rohan's Heaven's Door, Jousuke-kun's mom had the same memories written into her, just as we thought. The paragraph that said "Attempted suicide by stabbing both wrists with scissors" had been added into her memories just as it had with my friend in my grade. But it seemed that this paragraph didn't have enough information for us to pinpoint who the culprit was.

Recognizing the culprit as our "enemy," we had a talk together. The conclusion we came to was to pretend we had given up on investigating the incident. Right now, the "enemy" must be on guard knowing we're sniffing around for him. If we publicly searched for a boy with scratch marks on his arm, he might launch some attack on us. And if that happened, our families could be in danger like with what happened to Jousuke's mom. That was one thing we had to avoid.

However, we hadn't actually given up on our search for the "enemy." We split up the parks in Morioh between us to investigate, and we checked in each one to see if they had any slides or swings and other playground equipment in them as well as whether they had a clock erected there or not.

'Scratch, scratch, scratch... My head feels like it's about to explode. I have to do this or I won't be able to take it. Fingernails on my arm. Scratch, scratch, scratch... Everyone's voices are so loud, it's irritating it more and more. I can hear them out the window, over by the swings and the slide. Those shit stains, playing around out there all carefree. I wanna kick the shit out of them. The hands of the clock out in the plaza aren't moving at all...'

According to Kishibe Rohan, this paragraph written into the boy from my grade was an actual experience the "enemy" had had. If that was true, then the person we were looking for either lived somewhere where they could see a park from their window or else they did at some point in the past. Otherwise they wouldn't have seen "swings" and a "slide" out a window.

So we just needed to look for a boy who currently or previously lived next to a park and currently was enrolled at Budougaoka High School or Middle School and had scratch marks on his arm. The person that met all those criteria would be our culprit.

We decided that first, we would search parks that seemed to match the conditions. Morioh was dotted with no less than twenty parks ranging from ones that could carry an entire forest to tiny ones located between mansions. And not many of them had a slide, swings, and a clock located all together.



But when we tried investigating the people that lived around those particular parks, there weren't any boys that gave us any sense he might be the "enemy." The days went by without us finding a single lead.

It was late February, 2000 and end of semester exams were beginning. Yamagishi Yukako-san had dragged me to the town library with her. The library was a Western style building located just past the shopping district in front of the train station. The walls were totally covered in rose vines, so people had nicknamed it the Thorn Building. She sat me down across from the reading space on the first floor and forced me to solve problems. If you've read the manga, you'll know that if I tried to go against her wishes, my life might be in danger. As I was there being made to study in the Thorn Building, a girl who said she was classmates with Yukako-san in elementary school showed up and started talking to us. Yukako-san had a figure like a foreign model, but that girl was slender like the shape of a flower.

'Do you use this library a lot, too, Yukako-san?'

'Just when I'm studying with Hirose-kun.'

Yukako explained to her that we were boyfriend and girlfriend. The girl turned toward me again and bowed.

'Nice to meet you. I think I at least know your name.'

'Huh? Have we met?'

Without answering, she smiled sweetly. Then she said her name was Futaba Chiho and she lived right nearby Yukako-san's house. The two of them didn't seem to be very close friends, but they at least knew each other to the degree where they'd greet each other if they crossed paths.

Thanks to the studying I was forced into in the library, I finished my end of term exams safely. Apparently Jousuke-kun managed to just get by, but Okuyasu-kun... not so much. Knowledge of his catastrophic test results spread through the school like wildfire. When we got the results back, he showed me his exam paper himself, and it indeed was the kind of wasteland unlike anything seen before in the school's history. When girls from other classes we didn't know passed by Okuyasu-kun in the hall, they looked at him and whispered to each other. When Okuyasu-kun noticed and turned towards them, they screamed and ran away. He was really a kind person once you got to know him, but because he had a face like a bully out of a comic strip, apparently there were a good number of students who feared for their lives just from him looking at them.

While we were stressing over end of term exams, Kishibe Rohan had obtained a few pieces of information about Orikasa Hanae. Apparently, someone was making large transfers into her bank account every few years. Also, she had suffered from cervical cancer one year earlier. She'd had successful surgery, but became unable to bear children afterwards, apparently.

At that point, we'd checked every part in Morioh. After narrowing it down to only parks with a "slide," "swings," and a "clock," we went about finding windows you could see them all from. There were only a handful of those, but when we figured out who lived there and who had lived there previously, we were never able to find a middle or high school age boy. It's possible that the plaza described in the "enemy's" memory was in some other town. If that was the case, we were at a dead end.

One morning, my alarm clock rang and I woke up. It was the time of year where it was usually starting to feel like spring, but it was deathly cold outside my covers. When I opened the curtains, snow was falling outside the window. That day was the day of the closing ceremony of the school I go to, Budougaoka High.

March 17th, 2000.

In the middle of the closing ceremony, the snow started to fall harder. The flakes had grown to the size of a school uniform button and nothing but snow was visible outside the window frame. It was like an avalanche just coming down constantly until

the ground sank into a sea of white. We got our report cards from our teachers and I left the school. The strength of the storm had died down a bit, but the snow was still coming down. The snowfall had already reached 20 centimeters at that point, so I gave up on riding my bike home and decided to use the bus. I passed through the school gate and walked to the bus terminal in front of the train station. As I shivered waiting for the bus, Jousuke-kun happened by.

Jousuke-kun was staring at the circular pond in the center of the terminal. He didn't have an umbrella either and snow was starting to accumulate on top of his pompadour.

'Where's the mountain bike you always ride?'

'I left it at school.'

We still had not caught the culprit who hurt Jousuke-kun's mom, but given that two months had passed since then, even he had calmed down. We got on the same bus that was bringing students home from Budougaoka High. None of the seats were free, so we held onto the straps. As the bus got moving and the began to shake, we gazed out the window at the white landscape.

'I don't think it's snowed this much since when I was a kid,' Jousuke-kun muttered. When we were four years old, Morioh had a record-breaking amount of snowfall. That was probably what he was talking about.

'No, it was nothing like this. I'm pretty sure night there was a lot more.'

The bus entered Futatsumori Tunnel. The windows suddenly grew dark, like we were driving at night. Jousuke-kun stared at his face reflected in the window.

There's a story I heard from Jousuke-kun before. When he was 4 years old, on a night of a heavy snowstorm, he almost died.

It's kind of a long story, but let me tell you about what happened that night.

It was the winter of 1987. Jousuke-kun had been stricken with a high fever of unknown origins. His mom had taken the car out at night to bring him to the S City hospital.

That night, Morioh had a record-breaking snowstorm. They were in the middle of some farm roads when they had some bad luck and the car tires got stuck in the snow, leaving Jousuke-kun's mom unable to move the car whatsoever. Even with chains on the tires, it didn't matter. The car wouldn't budge an inch forward or back.

Jousuke-kun's condition was getting worse by the minute. His mom wanted to call someone for help, but that was when Morioh was still developing, so there weren't as many dwellings or traffic as there is now. She didn't see any houses nearby. All she saw around her were fields covered in snow. But then, the mother and son were saved by a lone high school boy.

Stuck in the un-moving car, his mom spotted the boy in her rear-view mirror. He was wearing a school uniform and looked like a delinquent with his hair up in a

pompadour. Who knows what someone like him was doing out there in the middle of a farm road on that snowy night. The delinquent high school boy peeked into the car. His body was all beat up like he had just been in a fight; he had bruises and scratches all over him and his lips were cracked. Jousuke-kun's mom was immediately on guard. But he saw the four-year-old boy in pain sitting in the passenger seat and said, 'That kid, he's sick, isn't he? I'll push the car.'

Without hesitating, he took off his uniform jacket and put it under the wheel of the car. Then he went around to the back of the car and started pushing with both hands. Jousuke-kun, while in his dazed state, saw the boy.

'Okay, hit the accelerator. Once you start moving, don't stop, just keep going... You don't want your tires stuck in the snow again.'

Praying, Jousuke-kun's mom stepped on the accelerator. The chain-wrapped tire caught on the uniform and the car finally started moving.

They made it safely to the hospital and Jousuke-kun was admitted for medical treatment right away. Starting that night, Jousuke-kun was hovering between life and death for five whole days. With his muddled consciousness during this period, Jousuke-kun thought about the boy that had saved him., That boy's uniform must've been ripped to shreds with the chains on the tire. What allowed Jousuke-kun to endure the pain from the fever was imagining the boy's back, wet from the snow as he left.

Later, Jousuke-kun's mom looked for the boy, but apparently she wasn't ever able to find him. She also couldn't find anyone who knew who that high school boy was.

What sort of person would do something like let their own clothes get trampled in order to save a total stranger? Maybe he didn't see that uniform jacket as worth anything? No, that didn't seem likely. He did that out of pure good will. That act changed how Jousuke-kun lived his life after that point. Even now, that boy is someone Jousuke-kun admires.

Jousuke-kun's pompadour is modeled after that boy's hair. When he first entered high school, the older delinquents in the school made fun of it, and they ended up with different-shaped noses after talking to him than they'd had before. Normally, Jousuke-kun isn't the type to recklessly pick fights, but when someone makes fun of his hair, his whole attitude changes. That's because it makes him feel like they're insulting the boy that saved him as a child, too.

I heard chain-wrapped tires chip away at the road. Using the faint reflection in the window pane, Jousuke-kun arranged his hair.

'I just can't get it ta look right,' said Jousuke-kun with a frustrated look on his face. Though I couldn't tell what exactly about it wasn't right.

'I honestly can't imagine you with a hair style besides that one.'

'If I got rid 'a this hair, I wouldn't be Higashikata Jousuke anymore. I'd be some other guy.'

He made a face as if to say, 'What're you doin', bringin' that up now?'

The way the man exposed himself to the cold by taking off his jacket to help a total stranger was something that was etched deeply into Jousuke-kun's heart. Not only did he owe the person his life, I think Jousuke-kun might have thought of him as a kind of father figure. Jousuke-kun grew up never knowing his father. So in the place of a father, he had the view of *his* back, guiding Jousuke-kun which way to move forward.

'Do you think you'd still like to meet that person, even now?'

'To be honest with ya, I'm kinda scared to. Part of me still wants to know that guy's name and find out who he is, but part of me is terrified of it. So much time's passed since that night, ya know?'

After a short pause, Jousuke-kun continued.

'But if I have the chance to find out who he is, there's no way in hell I'd let it slip by.'

By the way, when I was a kid and I read about the boy with the pompadour that saved Jousuke-kun as the series was ongoing. We had all sorts of theories between the fans, since it seemed like the sort of stand-alone story that was meant to foreshadow something down the line. But after that, Jojo Part 4 ended without that story ever coming up again. The most popular theory everybody had about the boy was 'It must've been Jousuke-kun himself sent back in time by some enemy Stand, right?' That's 'cause the silhouette and the clothes in the manga's flashback scene looked just like high school age Jousuke-kun's.

We came out of Futatsumori Tunnel and the snowy landscape was visible through the window again. We were far from the heart of the town now, so lots of trees and fields were in sight. Once we got to a street with houses, the bus would occasionally stop and people would get off. I take my bike to school, so I don't get a chance to ride the bus too often. The scene he saw out of the window was refreshing.

In the scenery whizzing by, there was a swing and a slide. It passed by our line of sight and fell behind us. My eyes snapped to them and I slammed my head against the window with a bang.

'What's wrong?' Jousuke-kun asked.

'Well, I think I just saw a park...'

'A park? A park around here?'

We'd checked all of Morioh's parks. But there shouldn't have been a park in that place we'd just passed.

Jousuke-kun and I got off at the next stop. Once the bus revved its engine and drove away, maybe because the snow was absorbing the vibrations of all the nearby sound, the area was completely silent. Shivering in the cold, we walked back down the road. Planted among houses dotted all over, there was one fenced-in plot of land. We could hear the voices of children running around playing. It wasn't a park. That place, surrounded by fields, was an orphanage.

---4---

'Are you nervous, Senpai?' she asked Hasumi-senpai, losing her balance in the snow as she walked forward. The snow had gotten heavy during the closing ceremony and Morioh had already turned all white. The cars and bikes stopped on the side of the road along with all the store signs and fences were all covered in snow. Chiho had almost slipped and fallen a bunch of times at that point; meanwhile Hasumi-senpai was walking down the road looking totally composed. Looking at the snowy landscape didn't seem to stir up any kind of strong feelings in him; he just looked as indifferent as ever. With everything all around being white with snow, the black uniform Senpai was wearing really stood out. Without turning around, and in a cold, emotionless voice, Senpai said, 'I'm not nervous. I'm actually really excited.'

They were almost at her house. It would be his first time meeting her father.

'It'll be fine. My dad's a nice guy.'

Her dad had told her a long time ago that if she got a boyfriend to be sure to invite him over.

As she walked, borrowing Senpai's hand to help her walk on the difficult path, they entered the housing district where her house was. As she guided him, she kept making quick glances at his face.

It had already been 2 months since they started dating. Their relationship had suddenly developed on the day they went to eat at the Italian Restaurant when they had that incident with that man. She didn't really know what had happened to that man after that. Apparently, it had been treated as just a tiny squabble.

She wondered why it was that Senpai was used to handling a knife. When she asked him about it, he said that he and his friends used to throw knives for fun back at the orphanage. Once they started dating, she started to see different sides of Hasumi-senpai that she hadn't before. He had a postcard with a photo of a meadow hanging up on the wall of his house. He had scars and bruises on his body which he told her were left over from a traffic accident he was in as a kid. They went together to the orphanage he grew up in and she got to see him talk with the teachers and his friends there. She met up with her friend that went to the girls' schools in S City at a family restaurant and when she told her about Hasumi-senpai, the girl happily offered to treat them to dinner.

When they came to the three-pronged fork in the road they always parted ways at, this time they turned in the same direction. After walking in the residential district a bit, her house soon came into sight. It was a one-story building with Western architecture that her father had designed himself.

'Are you growing flowers?'

Senpai looked over at the garden from outside the gate. The potted plants and flower beds were covered in snow, too.

'Yeah, but they haven't been blooming since Mom left.'

Her parents had divorced because of a former lover of her father's. She had been mad at that woman for a while, but she didn't think about her at all now.

She opened the locked door with her key. The leather shoes her dad wore were sitting on the earthen floor. The shoes Senpai took off appeared to be about the same size as her father's when he placed his next to them.

'You have the same sized shoes as my dad.'

'I guess. Who cares?'

Classical music was playing in the living room. Her father had a collection of wood-grain furniture including huge wooden speakers. Next to the living room was the kitchen, and they could smell the pleasant scent of beef stew coming from it. Her dad was cooking. Whenever he got home from work early, her dad always made dinner. When she called out to him, they heard the squeak of a faucet being turned off. Then, her father appeared, wiping his hands on his apron. Her dad's eyes stopped on Senpai and he furrowed his brow and made a disagreeable face. Just when she thought he might be sizing up Senpai, he suddenly thrust his index finger forward.

'You bastard. You detestable little brat. So you're the boy that sweet-talked my daughter, are you? You think I'll just let you get away with that?'

Senpai didn't move a millimeter.

'Well, I guess it's okay. I heard you were coming today, so got a stew ready. I hope you'll have some.'

Her dad gave Senpai a chummy pat on the back. He was only pretending to be mad. Seeing them standing next to each other, they gave off a similar feel. The shape of their eyes and the outlines of their faces were exactly the same.

'Want me to take your bag?' Chiho asked Senpai. He had been holding his school bag. He shook his head, turned to face her father, and gave a deep bow.

'My name is Hasumi. It's very good to meet you. I hope that at some point, you and I are able to have a long chat.'

---5---

She looked into a mirror to make sure her she still looked sane. It's something that was frequently on her mind. Without the hope of escape, she probably would've gone insane a long time ago. With the new year starting, a lot of people were taking time off from work. Without the usual sound of bustling commuters, her day between the two giant concrete walls went by silently as if time had stopped. After she'd become pregnant, her breasts had swelled. She spent it reading books on childbirth until she'd memorized them, staring at the postcard of the grass field, and solving crossword puzzles.

That night, Oogami Teruhiko came to the roof as usual to drop off food and supplies and left. Their delicate balance that was always in danger of falling apart at any time continued. That man probably thought it was a miracle she hadn't already killed herself.

He wasn't the only one that was working to maintain this relationship. With her throat destroyed, she could no longer yell loudly, but if she tried something like hitting the pipes, she should eventually be able to call someone over. Of course, not a single day went by that she didn't think about that. But in the end, out of concern over her parents' safety, she couldn't.

It was also very rare for anyone besides Oogami to look down from the roof. While both the company building and the multi-tenant building had fences on them to prevent falls, you couldn't see all the way down the gap between the buildings unless you looked over them. For the company building, not many people came up to the roof and if there was a "do not enter" sign up, then that would probably be enough to keep anyone from going up there. Oogami might've setup something like that to keep anyone from going there.

But was that really enough to keep absolutely anyone from looking down the gap between these buildings for half a year...?

For a long time, she hadn't heard the voice of anyone besides Oogami Teruhiko, so when she heard a woman's voice call down to her, Akari felt afraid.

'Um... Excuse me...'

That voice called down in a shaky voice like the person was shivering in the cold. Praying she wasn't dreaming or hallucinating, she came out from under her blankets.

'Is there really someone there...?'

The light of a flashlight shone down between the buildings. Akari squinted and looked upwards. From her silhouette and her voice, she judged that the person there must be a woman.

She had so many things she wanted to say, but she got a lump in her throat and couldn't think of where she should start. With her arms shaking, she managed to reply with just 'I'm here.' It wasn't a loud enough voice to reach all the way to the roof. But she

seemed to have noticed her. And Akari could tell that it took the woman's breath away. When she saw Akari, words escaped her.

But then, as if suddenly remembering something, the woman said, 'I went to the police, but they didn't believe that letter. So I came myself to see if it was true.'

She spoke in a voice like she didn't want anyone nearby to overhear. Like her heartbeat was racing. The baby in Akari's belly started squirming. If she could escape, she would be able to safely give birth to this child.

'I'm going to help you right now, don't worry, just hang on. My god, this is so awful... But, one thing...'

A few beats went by with no one saying anything. Before long, she said, uncertainly,

'Please listen to what I have to say.'

She dropped something down to Akari. It was a roll of papers.

'Please take a look at that. I'm worried...'

It was a bundle of billing statements held together with a rubber band.

'It doesn't have to be all of it. Half is fine. That should still leave you enough for you to buy a whole house in Morioh, right? If you accept that condition, I'll help you out. I have my car parked out in front of the building. There's a rope ladder inside. I'll go get it and I'll come right back.'

She'd written that she'd hidden Oogami Teruhiko's money in the letter she put under the cat's collar. It was because of *that* that she was willing to help Akari.

If Akari could get out of there, she wouldn't even have minded giving her all the money. She decided to accept her condition. She couldn't manage to say, 'okay' in a voice that would reach her, so she just gave an exaggerated nod. The woman gave a sigh of relief.

'Okay, got it. Please just stay right there.'

She stepped away, leaving Akari alone between the buildings again. The woman took the flashlight, so Akari was left in the dark. Thank goodness. Now she could go home. She could even go back to her mom and dad's house. But while part of her was celebrating, part of her felt suspicious.

While she'd written that she'd hidden a lot of money in the letter, she'd kept the exact amount hidden. There could be millions or hundreds of millions of yen in the bag. But the woman had said, 'Half should be enough to buy a house in Morioh.' That made it sound like the woman knew in advance how much money was in the bag.

She wasn't going to get tricked anymore. She considered the possibility that Oogami Teruhiko had somehow obtained the letter she'd attached to the cat. It wasn't impossible. Maybe he read the letter and set up a plan to turn the tables on her? He had to do something if he wanted out of this stalemate. It might also make sense that that woman, assuming this was Oogami Teruhiko's trap, wanted a share of the money. Once she was brought outside, their goal would be to have her guide them to the money to

give the woman her share. Of course, once they knew where the money was, they wouldn't need her anymore.

But if her hypothesis was correct, that would mean this situation could be very dangerous for her, wouldn't it?

No, that's not right. It might be unfortunate, but it wasn't the worst thing. In fact, it could be her big chance. Because *they* hadn't realized she'd figured it out yet. If she pretended she was fooled, she might be able to get out of here. She would talk about the location of the money, and while the woman was looking for it, she might find an opportunity to run. That plan gave her far more hope than just staying where she was.

She broke her mirror, picked up a triangular piece that seemed like she could use it as a weapon, and put it in her coat pocket.

Shortly after that, while making a lot of noise, a rope ladder was dropped from the roof.

'Do be careful you don't fall.'

The light of a flashlight appeared from the edge of the building. Down the side of the wall, a ladder dropped from the roof to the very bottom of the building valley, like a slender spider's thread. It was around 30 meters straight up. Desperate to get free, she grabbed the rope ladder and set her feet on the bottom step. Putting her weight on it, the rope creaked.

One step at a time, she climbed up. As her perspective got higher, joy over the idea that she might finally escape welled up in her. Fearing her hands might start shaking, she gripped the rungs of the ladder tight. She was looking forward to feeling the wind blow against her once she got on the roof. Wind never blew between the buildings. The air was always stagnant.

There was only one problem. How was she going to explain about where the money was? As she climbed up the ladder, the idea swirled around inside her head. Once she got up to the roof, the woman would definitely ask her. She might even ask her to guide her there. But she couldn't tell her the truth. If this was a trap, Oogami would be right nearby waiting with bated breath.

She had to get away from here and to a place where there were people. If there were lots of people around, they probably wouldn't do anything dangerous even if they didn't have any more use for her.

She needed to move. She needed to move away from that spot and get herself time to find an opening she could escape through. But if she honestly told the woman where the travel bag stuffed with the money was, she wouldn't be able to move one step away from this place.

That was because the magic words they so wanted to know were: "between the buildings."

The travel bag was here. Over these past six months with her sitting here unable to get out from between these buildings, it was sitting right under her nose.

On that day when Oogami Teruhiko called her up to that roof, she came to their rendezvous spot carrying the bag. Originally, she was planning on shoving the money in his face and questioning him about it. She wanted to find out where he'd gotten the money from and if what this woman named Orikasa Hanae had said was true.

But when she was waiting for him to come to the roof, she cooled her head. She actually started to feel that maybe she was the one who'd gone too far by going to his apartment, sniffing around, and even looking on the other side of his ceiling. And that if she showed him this bag, it might just over-complicate things. Just when she thought about hiding the bag somewhere, she looked at her watch and saw it was just 5 minutes before their meeting time. He was going to be there any second, but the roof was just this wide-open space with nowhere to hide anything.

It may have not been the brightest of ideas, but she did come up with a way to hide it. There was a multi-tenant building next to the company building with a roof at about the same height. There was less than one meter of width between the two. It probably wouldn't be too much for her to throw the bag onto the next roof, right?

She quickly tried out her theory, which resulted in failure. The water from the drizzle that had just started made her hand slip. The bag stalled in midair and failed to make it over the wire mesh fence on the building's roof. It made the fence shake with a *schwaang*, causing drips of rainwater to scatter everywhere, and the bag fell down between the tangle of pipes between the buildings.

After being pushed into the valley between the buildings, she peeked around deep into the pipes, making sure Oogami Teruhiko didn't see. Among the empty cans and rotting scraps of paper was the black travel bag with water leaking out of a joint in a pipe dripping down onto it. The bag was made of a water resistant fabric and the contents inside were in a plastic bag, so it should still be dry and undamaged. She was worried that he might eventually find out it was there, but Oogami Teruhiko stayed unaware. Probably thanks to its view from the roof being blocked by pipes and the bag's black color.

Akari couldn't honestly tell her the magic words. She'd have to say it was hidden in the mountains or stuck in a coin locker or somewhere. She would offer to lead her to it. And when they were moving, by car or by foot, she should be able to find some opportunity to escape.

As she climbed the ladder, a map of Morioh formed in her head. Where would the best place for hiding money?

Suddenly, everything went dazzlingly bright. A light was being shown down on her face from the roof of the building. It was the kind of direct light you'd see in the movies when a cop was questioning a suspect. It was so bright she couldn't see anything, so she stopped mid-climb and grabbed tight onto the rope ladder.

'At first, you were such a pure girl, so blissfully ignorant. But it seems that somewhere along the way, that meager existence grew to possess an untrusting heart.'

It was a man's voice. He said it as though he were taking pity on her. She squinted her eyes to find that there were two flashlight lights shining down from the top of the rope ladder.

'Look at that expression. She understands that you didn't come here to save her.' As she got used to the bright light, the figure next to her came into view.

'Even if she climbs up to the roof, she won't speak the words I want to hear. The things that come out of her mouth are never the truth. All she does is lead me around in circles trying to trick me. The performance in this confined, damp playhouse has ended in failure. She already knows you're acting.'

She felt like her entire body had turned to lead. All feeling left her hands and it was all she could do to not drop from the ladder.

'She knows? How can you tell?'

'At first, it was just intuition. Then I did a visual inspection. Look there, there are bits of broken glass all over the ground.'

He shifted the light that had been shining in her face little to light up the bottom of the building valley.

'She was planning a dramatic turnabout performance. It probably would've been quite gruesome, perhaps even including bloodshed.'

'Maybe we should try bringing her out anyhow. Maybe we can make her talk?'

'If the outside wind hits her body, she may remember her parents, start sobbing and begging forgiveness, and give the answer I seek. But that will not happen. Why? Because she knows that even doing *that* won't save her. When people like that are fighting back, they're actually able to bring out strength beyond their previous potential. So whether she starts sobbing and puts up a magnificent fight, I'd rather not make that bet. We'll have her climb back down, back to the bottom of that pit.'

It was like she was climbing up a spider's thread and it had suddenly been cut. For a moment, she thought about ignoring what he'd said and climbing up to the roof. Maybe if she climbed as fast as she could, she could make it up to where they were and grab onto them.

'If you try to fight back and get bitten, the bite could get infected and fester. Seeing as you're living in utter squalor and all. Take a good look; is that really something that used to be a human? Undoubtedly 100 out of 100 people would avert their eyes from such a thing. Do you know how much trouble it's been keeping you alive all this time? Now, go on back down. You don't belong up here. Just to make sure you're aware, we can let this rope ladder drop at any moment. If you take a single step higher, you'll fall along with the entire ladder. And if you fall from that height, I hate to think what would happen to the baby in your belly.'

She just managed to hold back tears. With them shining those flashlights down on her, she didn't want to let them see her cry.

It took time to go back down. One step at a time, as the roof got further and further away, the sorrow made her feel like her heart was going to burst from her chest. Once she set foot on the ground, they started rolling the ladder up to the roof. She could hear the woman's voice from above her head.

'Sorry. But I really am that cat's owner. Oogami-san said he wanted to borrow my cat for a bit. Not that I thought he would put on a whole performance like this. He said he purposefully let that cat in between the buildings so you wouldn't lose the will to live. We couldn't have you lose your mind and become unable to tell us where the money was. He said we had to dangle the idea of hope over you to make sure that didn't happen. Because hope is one thing that would keep your mind going. Hey, so, it's been a while. We actually talked on the phone before, remember?'

At that moment, she realized. If time hadn't eroded her memory somewhat, she would've realized right away that this was the voice she'd heard on the phone half a year ago. She was Orikasa Hanae.

'Well, see you later. I'll be stopping by to check on you once in a while along with Oogami-san. Speaking of which, did you know? He got married. Not to me. He said it was with someone he'd just gotten to know recently. Well, not that that really matters.'

Not long after, the two of them left the roof and the valley between the buildings was once again filled with darkness.

---6---

Even indoors, they could hear the laughter of the children playing outside. Out the window, they saw kids packing up the fallen snow into snowballs and throwing them at each other. Most of them were elementary schoolers, but there were some kindergartners and some middle schoolers among them. This orphanage looked similar to the kindergarten I'd gone to. There were hedges and a gate, a building where the children lived, and a plaza with play equipment.

Inside the building there was a small room that served as the school's staff room. There were just 3 desks set up in a row and there was a beat-up sofa set at the window for guests. Jousuke-kun and I sat there next to each other. There was a kettle on the stove and steam was quietly drifting out of the spout.

Several children were looking in through the window from outside. Jousuke-kun made an intimidating gesture and they all let out noisy yells and scattered in every direction.

'I had no idea a place like this existed.'

'Yeah, but this isn't necessarily the place we've been searching for...'

I looked out to the plaza. There were both a snow-covered swing and slide here. But I didn't see a clock anywhere. And there were lots of parks in Morioh that had all three. It seemed to me that we'd have a much better chance of finding the place in the enemy's memories at one of those than a place like this that only fulfilled 2 of the 3 conditions.

An orphanage staff member, a young woman who looked to be in her 20's, poured tea into a teacup. She sat in front of us and started a bit of small talk. She talked about the recent weather and how with all this snow, the orphanage director had gone out a while ago and was taking a long time coming back. We lied and said we were doing research on orphanages as a project for school, and she gave us a synopsis of what the orphanage did and its history.

'The kids are joking about how you have some mysterious power that heals their injuries,' said the woman staff member with an amused laugh. Jousuke-kun and I exchanged glances.

She was talking about what had happened earlier. Shortly after they had gotten off the bus and arrived at the orphanage, a girl that had been playing in the plaza had tripped and fallen, scraping the palms of her hands on the ground. The place her hands had landed wasn't covered in snow due to being covered by the overhang of the roof, and instead had exposed frozen ground that was as rough as a vegetable grater. That ended up the little girl with two palms looking awful with blood, mud, and chafed skin. The girl wouldn't stop crying and just when the female staff member realized there was something going on, Jousuke-kun approached the girl. He covered the girls' tiny hands with his huge ones and at the next moment, the girl stopped crying and a confused look

appeared on her face. When Jousuke-kun removed his hands, the scrapes on the girl's hands along with the awful pain had cleanly vanished.

'What kind of treatment did you give her? You don't really have some mysterious power or something, do you?'

As we were listening to her talk, I glanced over at the little ornaments on the shelf and saw a porcelain Virgin Mary hugging a baby. Then Jousuke-kun shook his head.

'The scratches weren't all that bad to begin with and I work at my school's infirmary. I'm used to treating that sorta thing. But anyhow, there's something I wanted to ask. Uh, it's about clocks.'

'Clocks?'

'See, this guy here, he just loves clocks. He's just always taking pictures of clocks at train stations and parks,' said Jousuke-kun, patting my shoulder.

'Th-That's the story you're going with?' I couldn't help but think. But, left with no alternative, I nodded.

'...Uhh, I just get so excited when I see a clock. It's kinda hard to describe. I just feel a sense of romance from that minute hand and that hour hand. Like two lovers chasing and being chased. By the way, in that plaza over there, there wouldn't happen to have been a clock there up till a few years ago, was there...?'

I didn't see one around now, but maybe there used to be one. If that were the case, this orphanage could be the location of the enemy's memory. But it didn't seem to ring any bells with the woman staff member.

'Um, I'm not so sure about that. Not about your hobby, I mean whether there was a clock there or not...'

'Could it maybe have been removed recently or anything...?'

'This is only my first year working here. So I'm afraid I don't know much about what was here before that...'

'Is there anyone that would know?'

She was the only adult in the room.

'I'm sure if you ask the director, you'll find out. Like I explained earlier, she's out and has been delayed due to the snow. I'll look for someone else that might know. Would you mind waiting here for about 5 minutes?'

The female staff member got up, opened the sliding door to the hallway, and an older elementary school age boy came in.

'Hey, I wanna use the scissors. Can I borrow them?' said the boy to the female staff member, like he was talking to his family. The female staff member took out a list of names and wrote in what I assume was the boy's name. I guessed they needed to be careful about handling sharp objects since there were small kids living there.

Just after the boy left, the female staff member told us, 'I'll be right back,' and left, too, leaving only Jousuke and me in the staff room-like room.

The room was decorated with drawings the children had done. Supposedly, 15 children who, for one reason or another, could not live with their parents, were living in this orphanage. And apparently there were over 500 orphanages like this across the country. Jousuke-kun got up from the sofa and stared at the kids' handicrafts adorning the shelf. Then he reached out to a porcelain Virgin Mary statue and stroked the baby in her arms with his finger and said, 'I heard a story about this kid turning water into wine, ya think maybe he was a Stand user?'

Earlier, when Jousuke-kun had removed the scrapes on the girl's hands, the kids gathered nearby all looked on wide-eyed with amazement. Of course, it was his Stand ability that had healed the girl's injuries.

Jousuke-kun's Stand had a human form like a medieval knight. Its name was Crazy Diamond. There was nothing its power could not destroy. One hit from those fists could turn a concrete wall to dust in an instant. Not only that, but it also had the ability to repair broken things. Broken bones, cuts; it could fix them all instantly.

I've gotta say, it's pretty mysterious how those two seemingly-opposite abilities of destruction and regeneration can coexist like that. Maybe Jousuke-kun himself has two sides to him like that. Now that I think about it, Jousuke-kun has definitely seemed like he's had two personalities at times. While at one moment he might give a friendly impression, if somebody makes fun of his hair he'll be mercilessly beating up the person the next moment.

I noticed that at some point, the kids had started crowding around the window and looking in. Their eyes were focusing on Jousuke's hair for the most part. I could only hope they wouldn't point and say anything weird about it. Jousuke-kun made a goofy face and shouted 'WAAH!' surprising the kids. The kids laughed as they scattered away from the window.

The door opened and the female staff member from earlier came back in. With an apologetic look on her face, she said, 'I'm sorry, I couldn't find out anything about the clock. I couldn't get a hold of anyone that's worked here for a long time.'

'Ah well. That's it, I guess.'

Jousuke-kun and I looked at each other and nodded, agreeing was time to head home. We'd have to try searching some other town's parks after all. The more time passed since the incident, the culprit seemed farther and farther away. We were at wit's end.

Just as we thanked the female staff member and started getting ready to go, the sliding door opened and the boy that had borrowed the scissors earlier appeared.

'Did you finish your project?'

'Mhm.'

The female staff member took the scissors from the boy and pressed a seal onto the list of names, probably to indicate that it had been returned. When the boy left the room, Jousuke-kun traced his pointer finger along his cheek and said, 'Umm, they're

just scissors, right? Seems kinda overly careful to do all that just ta borrow 'em. Do ya really need the sign-in sheet and everything?'

The female staff member made a troubled face and nodded.

'We have a special policy here. You see, a long time ago, apparently there was a child that stabbed both their arms with a scissor.'

The snowball fight seemed to have resumed as they could hear the voices of boisterous children outside. While at the same time, a stunned silence hung over the room. The woman made a face like she wished she hadn't said that out loud. Apparently, it was something they weren't supposed to be telling guests.

'...Wait, what'd you just say?' Jousuke-kun asked. 'A kid stabbed himself with a scissor?'

His mother had stabbed her arms with scissors. That's what the contents of the planted memories were. And Kishibe Rohan had hypothesized that it was something the enemy had once experienced.

'A long time ago, there a child that did that here?'

As Jousuke-kun approached her, the woman drew back with a frightened look on her face.

We couldn't get much out of her. Apparently, she wasn't allowed to talk to outsiders about the children, so the female staff worker didn't tell us much about it. But before too long, a middle-aged woman who was also the director of the orphanage returned.

'Was there ever a boy here who had been in a car accident? And did that boy stab himself in the arms with scissors?'

When I asked those questions, the director's expression markedly changed.

'You two are students at Budougaoka High School, yes? Are you friends with Takuma-kun?'

The director had spoken Hasumi Takuma's name. They tried to ask about him, but they didn't get any more than his name and age.

To make up for that, she did tell them about the clock. It seems there was once a clock in the plaza, but it was removed 7 years ago due to deterioration. It was definitive. We'd struck gold.

We left the orphanage and called a few people we knew to help gather as much information as we could on Hasumi Takuma. Two brothers I'm friends with had a 1999 Budougaoka Middle School yearbook. In it, we found a photo of Hasumi Takuma wearing a long-sleeved jacket. Seeing that, Jousuke-kun said, 'I know I've seen this face before somewhere. Back in January, I talked to this guy at the roundabout in front of the train station. Pretty sure there was a girl who was also a student with him. He was a weird dude that had a fountain pen in his chest pocket.'



---7---

'This child's birthmark is the same as yours, isn't it?'

'I guess. Who cares?'

That conversation was recorded in the leather-bound book. It was from a time when he was a tiny, simple being that could only search around on instinct for his mother's teat; when he lacked complicated emotions and the descriptions in the book were made up only of lists of information gleaned through his five senses. Once in a while, descriptions of emotions would show up. Though generally speaking, the only emotions were anxiety and comfort.

As he read through the paragraphs, his visual and tactile senses from those days were restored to him. His whole body being wrapped in a warm blanket, he was squeezed into his crib like a loaf of French bread or a tomato.

The woman got close to his face. Things far away still looked blurry, but if something was a few dozen centimeters away, he could see it. On the woman's chest was a lily-shaped golden brooch. On the other hand, the man didn't get close to his face so all he could see was a blurry silhouette.

'Goodbye, little baby,' said the woman as she moved away. She didn't enter into his vision again. That was the book's description of the day he was left on the temple grounds.

Around when he was in the 4th grade of elementary school, he became able to call out the leather-bound book at will and check information from the past immediately. It was like reading a biographical novel with himself as the protagonist and allowed him to learn about his early life for the first time.

He discovered that the golden lily brooch could be found in a small variety shop in Morioh. They were all hand-made and only 10 of them were sold. While investigating the shop's regular customers, Takuma found a woman named Orikasa Hanae.

Orikasa Hanae lived with a cat in a detached house in the new residential area. She didn't seem to have any family, but there was a man she met with once a year. He approached them, making it look like he was just coming by coincidentally, and heard the man's voice, confirming that he was the man with Orikasa Hanae when he was left at the temple.

'Don't believe me? I can prove it to you. There's a birthmark on my shoulder. Come over and see for yourself.'

January 3rd, 2000, the day Orikasa Hanae was killed. On that day, Takuma took off his school uniform and said that through the window pane. In her living room, Orikasa Hanae approached nervously. Only her pet cat on the sofa witnessed what happened.

His father's former lover had not aged much, and looked much younger than she actually was. While she was surprised by his arm covered in scars, her gaze moved to Takuma's shoulder. Seeing that horse-shaped birthmark, she seemed to realize that this

really was that baby. She averted her gaze and made a face like she was about to cry, like she was both scared and touched. But he had no interest in her feelings or the life she'd led up to that point.

When he held the leather-bound book out towards Orikasa Hanae across the window pane, she probably couldn't see the book itself. Normal humans couldn't actually see it.

But whether she could see it or not, what mattered was if it was in her field of vision at that distance. Even if she couldn't consciously see it, her soul sensed its existence and deciphered the book's text. No one could refuse that text. That text rang in the soul more than anything written by any novelist. Whether she wanted it or not, she was drawn into that scene and made to experience Takuma's memories and thread of emotions.

That phenomenon was called "Empathy." The scenery, air, color of the sky, and smell of that memory realistically enveloped the target's consciousness giving her a pseudo-experience. To Orikasa Hanae, it felt like she had just been hit by a car. Her soul was convinced of it and her body could not put up any defense against it.

Her bones creaked, broke, and were pulverized. While her clothes remained completely unharmed, her body was twisted by a phantom car. He'd brought a knife with him to deal the finishing blow, but there was no need for it. If he just left her there, she would eventually just die of blood loss. He knew from his prior investigation that she didn't interact with people in the neighborhood.

'Back then, when you were looking for the abandoned baby, what were you planning to do exactly? Did you think you'd try to raise it yourself?' he called out to her as she tried to stay alive, down on her hands and knees. She didn't reply. The Empathy would kill her. By showing her the pages of his book, he had planted memories in her, causing her to experience the same thing Takuma had. That was the leather-bound book's power.

The cat, surprised, ran away into another room. The book's ability didn't work on animals. It required making them read text in the book for its effect to work, so the target needed to be able to read Japanese. A child that couldn't read yet, an elderly person whose vision had blurred due to age, or a foreigner that couldn't read Japanese all wouldn't be affected by the book.

Also, it was vital that the target be in an environment where they could read it. If their vision wasn't clear so they couldn't see the book's actual pages, or if it was too dark to see, nothing would happen even if the book was held right in front of their face. There was also a distance limitation of the target needing to be no more than about 2 meters away. Any further and they wouldn't be able to decipher the text with normal vision, so it was also impossible to plant memories and injure them.

Takuma put his arms back through the sleeves of his jacket. There was a reason he'd taken off his jacket and showed her his birthmark. If she had stayed deep in her

living room and didn't come over to him, the book wouldn't be able to have an effect. He needed to get her two meters away from him so she could read the text. If she hadn't approached him, he would've killed her in some other way, like by smashing in the window.

'If you hadn't asked about me at the home for infants, you wouldn't've had to die.'

This wasn't a murder he'd been planning to commit. She'd started looking for the baby, so this was just to make sure she never found her way to him, Takuma. He didn't know what her motivation for looking for the baby was nor what her true feelings were. She suffered from a condition that prevented her from having children. That might have something to do with it, but he didn't care.

Her blood spread around the floor of the living room. The white cat that had run to the corner of the room, sidled up to the puddle of blood, brought its nose close, and stared fixedly at it.

Takuma scooped up the red, drippy beef stew with his spoon. It had a rich, profound, meat flavor. He wasn't sure if he thought it tasted good or bad. But he had to eat it if he didn't want to draw suspicion.

The heater was on inside the Futaba family house and the windows had fogged up. As they ate the food on the table, he listened to Futaba Teruhiko and Futaba Chiho. The two seemed to have a good relationship. They were laughing together like good friends. The conversation was about the novel Chiho was writing. She was talking with her father about developing the story.

'I'd imagine getting the last scene is hard for any author. Not that I've ever tried writing a novel, but I can't imagine any different. So for someone as inexperienced as you, it's only natural to be having so much worrying over your last scene. Just a suggestion, but how about this? For the end, how about only the heroine girl survives? And the man she's up against dies.'

'I'd kinda like to make it a happy end, if I can.'

'What do you think, Hasumi-kun?'

He put down the spoon and answered. 'I couldn't say until after I'd read the manuscript.'

'How about you have him read it?' said the father. Chiho nodded.

After the meal, she went to her room to print out the manuscript. With Chiho gone, Futaba Teruhiko started washing the eating utensils in the kitchen sink. Takuma walked around the room, stroking the wooden furniture with the palm of his hand. He was always only looking in from the outside; this was his first time actually touching it.

He was pretending this was his first time visiting, but he'd actually been to this domicile many times. Previously, when he peeked into the windows, he saw his still young little sister being raised with care by her mother and father. His little sister from a different mother, Futaba Chiho. She was born with what Takuma didn't have. A normal,

happy life like the one normal people had. If Takuma hadn't gotten involved, she probably would have lived out a peaceful life.

Today's newspaper was folded up on the credenza.

The father had undoubtedly read the articles about Orikasa Hanae's mysterious death. Chiho had shown interest in the incident and he had a good idea as to why. She had discovered the article about her, which her father had saved, and thought it odd. She may even have realized that the person who had died was one of her father's old lovers.

There was modern art hanging on the walls. As he looked at it, he heard the sound of a printer. It seemed that Chiho had started printing the manuscript in her room. Having finished washing the dinner dishes, Futaba Teruhiko approached Takuma.

'That noisy printer's like a busted violin, ain't it? It's an old model. I've been thinking about buying her a new one for her to celebrate her moving on to the next year in school.'

It seemed like his greatest joy in life was shopping for his daughter. He looked like a normal man, the kind you could find anywhere. He was an adult with several wrinkles on his face and had a gentle air about him. Adorning the wall next to the painting was a photo of a family of three, standing on a beach. When Takuma realized that it was a family photo he was looking at, he made an uncomfortable face.

'Wondering about her mom?'

'She told me. She said after her mom left, you started being overprotective.'

'It's what I live for, thinking about that girl. I've got a dream, ya see. I want to teach my grandkids how to do magic tricks and how to draw.'

Futaba Teruhiko seemed to have found something to truly care about in life in his daughter. Takuma had a pretty good idea of what his circle of friends was, but there was no one he smiled at besides Chiho. If something happened to her, he would probably be overcome with an unrecoverable sadness.

The sound of text being printed and paper being ejected continued. Takuma took his leather-bound book out to go over the results of his investigation of Futaba Teruhiko. Willing it to appear in his mind, the book floated onto his hand.

'What's that book?' asked Futaba Teruhiko, pointing to the dark brown leather-bound book Takuma was holding. It wasn't a random guess; his finger was pointing right at the book.

'...It's just a notebook. I had it in my pocket. The pocket in my school uniform.'

When Takuma moved the book, Futaba Teruhiko's eyes followed it.

'That's odd. You had that with you the whole time? I'm impressed you can hold something *that* big in a pocket.'

'They're surprisingly roomy, these pockets.'

Takuma attempted to hide his surprise. Somehow, he could see the leather-bound book. Then a possibility crossed his mind.

'This may sound weird, but would you mind if I asked you a few things?'

'Hm? What is it?'

'Have you ever felt like you were being protected by some kind of mysterious power?'

'Mysterious power?'

'Like you see something that seems like it must be a hallucination, or when you're in a tough situation you get saved by some unbelievably good luck...'

Why did he have this ability other people didn't have?

Maybe this was a kind of trait that got passed down from parent to child?

While scratching his beard with his fingers, the father's eye narrowed.

'Do you think this thing you're calling good luck may be more of an ability, Hasumi-kun?'

'What do you mean?'

'Intense pain endured down on your hands and knees or prayers made as you shivered in the cold all night; they're all useless before that ability. A long time ago, I had a bad situation going on at work. This was before I married her mother. I don't know what would've happened if I hadn't had this ability you called good luck.'

'What kind of good luck was it?'

'No one would come. Essentially, whenever there was a place I didn't want anyone to come to, they didn't. That happens in school, too, right? Like how delinquents use the landings on the staircases that go up to the roof as a secret spot to smoke. I would hide things in places like that. This time, if someone had come, I wouldn't be living the life I am now. That girl would've never been born and I wouldn't be living in this modest house, eating warm meals. But strangely enough, no one approached that space. It was like everyone's sense of direction went haywire when they were in the surrounding area. It was like all paths to that place disappeared from all human sight. All sounds coming from there slipped right past their eardrums, making it a dead-end street totally isolated from the rest of the world.'

'What exactly was it you were hiding there?'

'Something like a dog. I was raising it secretly in the space between two buildings. A gap right next to the company building. If it had barked at all, I would've been fired. Yeah, it was a dog. Every day, I would give it food. It got really dirty and muddy down there. If it weren't for my good luck, my ability, I'm certain someone would've realized that dog was there. But I was able to keep anyone else from finding out.'

He had three knives in his jacket, but he didn't plan on using them. Doing all he could to keep the look on his face or his tone of voice from changing, he replied. While pretending to admire his story, Takuma took out a few A4 size papers. The papers had a few people's names and company names printed on them.

In a nonchalant manner, Takuma asked, 'I was sure the hidden thing you were talking about was the crimes you'd gotten involved in.'

'Whenever I'm at a party with lots of people, I never know what to talk about. I really need to learn from that sense of humor of yours.'

A smile formed on Futaba Teruhiko's face. He sat down on the sofa and lit up a cigarette.

'But you're my daughter's boyfriend, so I don't think that's the best way to be getting laughs.'

'I know everything there is to know about you.'

Takuma placed the A4 size papers in front of the father. He watched him pick them up and start to look over them and observe him from a small distance.

After inhaling just once, the father put the cigarette out. The gentle atmosphere that had been there just before was gone. The feeling in the room was replaced with a cracking tension that seemed like it could shatter at any moment. As he saw the names printed on the papers, his expression changed. His eyes crossed over the papers many times, staring at it to make sure he hadn't mistaken what he'd seen. His wrinkles deepened, and he became a lot quieter than he'd been up to that point.

Every situation perceived by his eyes was left as a description in his book. He heard the father's breathing start to get faster, sensed the weight of the air on his skin, all of the information turned into text, where it would be forever preserved in the book. He was sure he would enjoy re-reading the paragraphs that formed from it many times over.

It took him 5 years to gather all those names together. He followed his car and found out the identities of the people he talked with. He read his lips during his secret chats and investigated what he talked about. At first, Takuma had no idea what Futaba Teruhiko was doing. He figured out that one of his correspondents was from an inspection organization, and he guessed the rest. He thought the reason the mother had gotten angry at him had to do with this case.

Over 10 years ago, there was a demand for buildings in this town. Along with the sudden urban development, there was a need for people to secure places to live. For those selling buildings, it was a wonderful and frenzied time. He was involved with a group that was moving from a different area. In order to steal the rolls of banknotes that were flying around, he got involved in something he shouldn't have. It was a run-of-the-mill scam architects and construction workers did secretly behind others' backs.

'What's happening right now...?'

Futaba Teruhiko finally uttered some words. At some point, the music had stopped. The wooden speakers had gone silent. He had a look on his face like a hole had been poked in him.

'Did you have some goal in mind when you got close to my daughter...?'

Takuma walked slowly around the living room.

'Goal? Isn't that obvious...?'

He stroked the sofa's wooden elbow rest with the palm of his hand. He traced a smooth, satisfying curve with on it. It felt beautiful.

Why do humans live? The time from when they're born to when they die is a short, fleeting period. That time passes in the blink of an eye. When you die, the memories, emotions, and everything else accumulated in your head disappears. How much can a human accomplish in one lifetime? Why were you born? A great many people struggle over that question. But he was different. He learned the reason he was born when he was in elementary school. And the one that had given him his reason for living was his dear father.

'I want you to give me your blessing. I want you to recognize me as a member of your family.'

A surprised look appeared on his face.

'What do you mean?'

'Marriage. I'm already talking about that with her. This isn't some artificial relationship. Of course, we don't mean right now. Later, someday...'

The sound of the printer stopped, indicating that the printing of the novel had finished. The inside of the house was now completely silent. Futaba Teruhiko stared at Takuma's face. Before long, the hallway door opened and Chiho appeared, carrying a bundle of papers. Just as she was about to enter the room, she stopped in place. It seems she sensed the heavy mood in the room.

'What's goin' on?' she asked Takuma.

'Nothing. I was just thinking it was about time I got going. Isn't that right, sir?'

'...Yeah. He said he has something he has to go do, basically.'

Futaba Teruhiko stayed seated and nodded. Even as Takuma left the living room, he didn't stand up. Takuma called out to him.

'What I said before was a joke. Please don't take it seriously.'

Futaba Teruhiko made a face like he was going to ask something in reply, but in the end, he stayed quiet. Takuma bid him goodbye and left the house. Showing him the documents and the talk of marriage was all a side show for the most part. Compared to the fate he was awaiting now, they didn't mean much. Still, Takuma wanted to greet him. He wanted to meet him personally and talk to him or he would never be satisfied.

The outdoor lights of the residential district lit up the Western-style houses. The cold air seemed to bounce off his cheeks. After he put on his shoes and left the house, the snow that had accumulated on the road made a squeaky sound under his shoes as he stepped on it. Chiho's shoulders shook, having come out to see him off. Normally when she went outside, she always had her scarf on. But today her white neck was bare.

'What do you think is up with my dad?'

'Think about it from his perspective. His only daughter has a boyfriend now. Anyhow, how far have you gotten with writing that novel?'

'I've got the climax to write next.'

He took the bundle of print-outs and thrust them into his bag.

'After you get this finished, are you gonna start on your next novel?'

'I'm planning on a fantasy that's kinda like a children's book.'

'What kind?'

'A bath gets up and starts running. Like a car, all around a town.'

'Really? While someone's bathing in it?'

'Yup.'

'That sounds like it wouldn't be fun for the bather.'

'It's not gonna be.'

'By the way, can you see this?'

'Huh?'

Chiho tilted her head.

'Looks like you didn't inherit it. Never mind. Just talking to myself.'

It seems she couldn't see the leather-bound book he took out in the middle of the conversation. He as seized with an impulse to make her read some pages from it. Like, what would happen if he showed her all of the pages from when he was born to now? That would be just like copying his entire brain into hers, wouldn't it? The nights he spent at the riverbed doing knife handling practice, his life spent hating one man, would all feel to her like they had been her experiences. He wasn't sure if she could handle 7 years' worth of his past. He should be able to do it if he had 20 minutes. All he had to do was hold all of the pages' descriptions out in front of her.

The person known as Futaba Chiho would be starkly different compared to who she was before. One's past experiences shape one's personality and humanity, both things will even affect one's future. His past would take root in her mind and stay there. Like how one creature's generic material is inherited by its next-generation offspring.

This ability was a lot like organisms propagating or religious missionary work. It increased his number of offspring, spread the scope of his activity, at times weeded out other species, and at other times assimilated and evolved. The book was the chromosomes that had his genetic information written into them. He planted words in people and later pretended not to know about it.

He closed the cover and the form of the book disappeared as if sinking into his hand.

'What's wrong? You've seemed off for a while now.'

'I have a present for you, and I've been waiting for just the right moment to give it to you.'

He took a necklace out of his uniform pocket. Dangling at the end of the chain was a shiny black jewel. It was small as the end of his little finger. Chiho made a surprised face.

'This is a stone called jet. They also call it black amber, though it's actually more a kind of wood than a stone.'

'This is a... plant?'

'It turned into a fossil over tens of thousands of years. Because it electrifies when you rub it, the ancients thought that these stones contained magical powers. They wore them thinking they would ward off evil.'

He walked behind her and placed it around her neck. 'Cold!' she blurted out as the chain touched her white neck. For the 10 seconds it took to fix the metal clasp, they both held their breath. All they could hear was the sound of their clothes rubbing and the sound of stepping in snow. Once he fixed the clasp together, it slid down her neck and Takuma took a step back to look at her with it on. With Chiho's slender frame, her arms and neck made her look like a little kid. Even with her thick clothes, her chest and belly looked flat. The necklace chain might've been a bit too long for her.

Chiho said thanks. They talked about something dumb for a bit, and after a little while of girlfriend/boyfriend talk, he finally parted ways with her. When he gently waved his hand goodbye to her, he felt a number of emotions cross his mind. But he would not be meeting her again.

His revenge was complete. All that was left was to leave this place. The father and daughter would not find out about his real intentions until later. How much later, he didn't yet know. He had killed Orikasa Hanae, but he did not take his father's life. Not out of mercy. He wanted his father to live on so he could feel regret.

Takuma decided he would spend that last night at the municipal library, nicknamed the Thorn Building. He figured before he left town, he would at least read the manuscript he had been given.

---8---

Maybe because the black jewel in the necklace was originally a plant, it was surprisingly light. It had a color and gloss like it was the night itself compressed into a little gem, and it reminded her of Senpai's eyes. When she looked into his eyes close up, they were black as outer space. How much time must it take for a tree in a forest to end up as a stone like this? When she squeezed it, she felt like she had the flow of time itself there, clenched in her hand.

When she went back inside, she found her dad standing in the middle of the living room. He was staring off into space like there was something floating there.

'I think it would be best if you didn't see that boy anymore. Even if you'll never forgive me for it, I can make it so that boy never gets near you again if I want. I have that power. A power only special people are endowed with. No matter how much that boy wants to meet with you, he will not be able to get near you. I've given this ability of mine a name. I've named it "Memory of Jet." This really brings back memories of a certain person that landed me in quite a predicament a long time ago.'

At that moment, the father first noticed the necklace. She impulsively tried to hide it, but he grabbed her wrist and forcibly pried her hand open. Her father looked down at the black jewel in the palm of her hand and went silent, like time was standing still. Every last sound died out. The silence felt like it was crushing the two of them. Then the father let out a sentence. Sounding like it was if the world had ended, he said, 'It's dark...'

Chapter 4



Lacrimosa

Lacrimosa dies illa,
qua resurget ex favilla
judicandus homo reus:

Huic ergo parce Deus.
pie Jesu Domine,
Dona eis requiem. Amen

Chapter 4

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Lacrimosa dies illa
Qua resurget ex favilla
Judicandus homo reus;

Huic ergo parce, Deus.
Pie Jesu Domine,
Dona eis requiem. Amen.

[TL Note: Lacrimosa (Weeping) is the last segment of the Dies Irae sequence of Roman Catholic Requiem Mass. The whole hymn was famously set to music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Originally in Latin, it translates to the following.]

Confounded

Full of tears will be that day
When from the ashes shall arise
The guilty man to be judged;

Therefore spare him, O God.
Merciful Lord Jesus,
Grant them eternal rest. Amen.

---1---

For a while, she didn't cry or get angry. Even if the rat appeared and it rubbed its filthy body up against her foot, she didn't feel a thing. Sandwiches thrown down from the roof got covered in mud and turned rock-hard. She had no idea how much time had passed. She'd long quit making a mark on the wall for every day that passed. Her arms and legs wouldn't move anymore. She'd forgotten how to even move at all. A fly flew in front of her eyes, stopped on her face, and walked on top of her lip. She wouldn't mind if she died like that. With her last ounce of pride, she would be dying without letting that man know where the money was.

In the corner of her vision, there was a necklace with a black jewel lying on the ground. It was half-buried in the ground along with the trash. It was something he'd once given her when they were on a trip. She wished she'd thrown that thing in the storm drain she was using for a toilet.

The wall was wet from the tap water that was running down it. When she had first fallen down, she had honestly tried to climb her way back up. The blood from when she'd torn her nails out was still there, but the marks were just black smudges now.

What sort of life would she be living if she weren't shut up in this gap between buildings? Would she be happy? Would she have called her mother and father to her wedding and be blessed there by her relatives and friends?

She thought about what she had been living for so far in her life. Was there no point in her mother giving birth to her? Was her father working hard to raise her just a waste of time? Just how much meaning was there in her living right now thinking about things? The scenery she saw, sounds she heard, things during her life; they would disappear along with her body. Then the world would simply carry on without her in it. No matter what emotions swirled around inside her, it wouldn't affect anything even a tiny bit. It was as if she didn't exist at all. She should just stop thinking. Then she would be at peace.

At that moment, the baby in her belly moved. There was life unconnected from her own will active inside her body. That was a foot. This time it was a hand. It pushed from inside her belly. It was getting stronger and stronger each day. It was as though the baby was requesting something of her, but she hadn't the slightest idea what.

From above her head, she heard that man's voice.

The "magic words." All she had to do was mutter them and the life of her child would be secured.

The skin on her belly was taut. This child wanted to get outside, just as she wanted to get out from the gap between the buildings.

She couldn't move right away. It took a long time for that recognition to permeate her body. She had to put her broken, shattered heart back together little by little.

A feeling that she couldn't do it blended together with a feeling that she could. The "magic words." With those words, at least one of them could be saved.

First, she gathered strength into her fingertips. *Move*, she commanded. The slender fingers shook, causing the fly that had stopped on her face to flee. As she stretched her arm out towards the portable stove, the mud that had stuck to her body peeled off.

She twisted the dial and along with the sound of gas blowing out, a blue flame rose up. She felt heat, and her body started to feel resuscitated. All right. If that's how this child wanted it, she would sacrifice all the time she had left to her. If there was a God, then she hoped it would let her accomplish this. If it ended without any problems, she would sacrifice everything. Her blood, her flesh, her bone; it could take everything.

---2---

After we left the orphanage and got our hands on a bunch of documents about Hasumi Takuma, Jousuke-kun and I debated about whether or not to pay his house a visit that same day. We learned that he was living alone in a house in Northeast Morioh, but we were debating whether it was worth to go see him today or not.

'I mean, the guy's been left to his own devices for two months now. Might as well go pay him a visit tomorrow rather than trek out there at dusk in this snow at this point,' said Jousuke-kun, and we parted ways and headed home.

Once I got home, I had dinner with my family. The topic of how bad the snow was today came up with them, too. We also talked about where we'd take a trip to on spring vacation, which was starting tomorrow. Mom and my big sister had cheerful looks on their faces. Even though we could hear the sounds of the cars outside, my big sister didn't show any signs of anxiety. Time really does heal all wounds as long as no new misfortunes arrive.

'Hello, Kouichi-kun?'

After dinner, I went to my room and got a phone call from Yamagishi Yukako-san. I'd called her after we left the orphanage, but it had gone to the answering machine. She had a record of my call on her end, so she'd called me back.

'So, what were you calling about?'

'We were gathering information about someone. By the way, Yukako-san, are you cooking right now? Are you taking this call in the kitchen?'

I pressed the phone to my ear. I could hear the sound of some kind of fire burning coming from behind her.

'What? Cooking? And who's this someone you're talking about?'

I explained to her about how Jousuke-kun and I went to the orphanage after school and how we managed to figure out that a student named Hasumi Takuma was the culprit behind the murder of Orikasa Hanae as well as a Stand user.

'Hasumi Takuma?'

'Yeah, he's one year ahead of us. You know him?'

'The one with the kinda sharp eyes?'

In my room, I had a copy of a yearbook I'd borrowed from a friend that had a photo of Hasumi Takuma in it. I took a quick look at it and replied.

'Uh, sure, I guess you could say that. Besides that, some unique features are... Well, according to Jousuke-kun, he's always got a fountain pen in his chest pocket.'

'I think we're talking about the same guy. Yeah, I know him. Not that I've ever talked to him. I have seen him before, though.'

'Where?'

'Remember that girl we talked to earlier when we were studying?'

'At the Thorn Building? Your friend from elementary school?'

'Yeah, Futaba Chiho. I've seen him doing stuff with that girl a lot. I'm guessing they're going out. It's like they go to the library almost every day on their way home from school.'

That made me remember the girl we'd talked to in the library that was thin as the stalk of a flower. And speaking of which, Jousuke-kun had told me that when he met Hasumi Takuma at the roundabout in front of the train station, there was a girl with him. That must've been her.

'Ah, by the way, that Futaba Chiho girl...'

I could still hear the sound of something burning under Yukako-san's voice. After hearing the sounds of people screaming and glass breaking, I couldn't ignore it anymore. I cut her off and asked, 'Um, say, Yukako-san, I think I hear the sound of something burning over the phone. Is that my imagination?'

'Oh, are you talking about the fire? No, that's not your imagination. There's a house nearby me that's on fire.'

'You sure are calm about it.'

'Can you not see it from your room?'

I opened the curtains and saw a faint brightness in the direction of Yukako-san's house. I couldn't see any flames, but there was smoke lit up with a creepy tint of orangey gray.

'The fire department rushed over and started spraying water. A whole bunch of people came over to look at the flames. I'm actually there right now. Actually, this relates to what I was starting to say before...'

'That sounds pretty exciting. Uh, relates back to what?'

'It's that girl, Futaba Chiho's house. The one that's on fire right now.'

'I'm sorry, Yukako-san, but do you mind if I call you back?'

I called Jousuke-kun's house. His mom picked up the phone.

'Is Jousuke-kun there?'

'He's wandering around somewhere. He hasn't come home so far today.'

'...Oh, ok. I'll try his cell phone then. By the way, congrats on being discharged from the hospital.'

I hung up, looked out the window, and thought: how could I be such an idiot? Jousuke-kun would never think 'We can do it tomorrow'. He'd probably already made up his mind when he parted ways with me and was now heading straight over to Hasumi Takuma's house to beat the crap out of him. He wanted to take care of the matter on his own.

Now that I'd heard about Futaba Chiho's house being on fire and about the fact that she was apparently Hasumi Takuma's girlfriend, I wondered if there was any connection between Jousuke-kun and the fire. But I couldn't imagine him having gone to Futaba Chiho's house. He only knew Hasumi Takuma's address.

I tried calling Jousuke-kun's cell phone. Until last summer, we could only connect with each other outside using public phones, but sometime in autumn we both got cell phone contracts.

'Turned out that bastard hadn't come home yet.'

He'd just been walking on a path covered in snow. So he *had* gone to Hasumi Takuma's house, just like I'd thought, but Takuma hadn't gotten back to his house yet, apparently.

'Jousuke-kun, I got a call from Yukako-san a minute ago...'

And I told him what I'd just heard from her.

'I thought that residential district was unusually bright. Wanna go check it out?'

'Okay.'

'If he ain't at home, are there any other places ya think he might be?'

I could only think of one place. He apparently stopped by the library every day on the way home. The municipal library nicknamed the Thorn Building.

After getting off the phone with Jousuke-kun, I contacted our allies.

After I'd gotten dressed for the cold and put my shoes on in the entryway, my sister asked, 'Where are you going?'

'I'm just gonna head over to the convenience store to read manga,' I replied as I left the house.

I'd left my mountain bike at the school, so I headed to the Thorn Building on foot. It was a bit of a trek from my house, so I'd need a little time to get there. As I walked, I wondered which of our allies' house was closest to the Thorn Building.

---3---

The building was lit up at night, making it stand out heavily in the dark. Down the brick path leading from the iron gate to the building, up the stone staircase, was a solemn front door. There was still an hour until the 10 o'clock closing time. Besides the two library staff members at the counter, Takuma was alone in the library.

He sat at his usual seat on the first floor and started reading the bundle of papers Futaba Chiho had given him. It had been quite a while since he'd last picked up and read something printed on paper. The manuscript appeared to be a love story set in Morioh, but he wasn't sure what it was about that intrigued him.

After he'd read a decent way in, he heard some noise coming from outside the building. The two staff members went outside to see what it was, leaving Takuma alone inside the library.

He glanced outside and saw that it was bright in the direction of Chiho's house. It seemed something was happening there. He couldn't tell exactly what, but even if there was something going on, he had finished all that he had to do. All that was left was to leave this town. Once he got back home, he would cram a bag full of changes of clothes. He would have to make sure to take down the postcard he had hanging on the wall and find a space for it in his bag. His plan was to head off for a place that looked like the one printed on the postcard; a green field stretching as far as the eye could see.

It looked like he wouldn't end up having to use the three knives he had hidden in his jacket. He'd brought them from home in order to deal with the possibility of the father doing something unexpected. He could probably also have silenced him using the leather-bound book, but this ability had three weaknesses:

- In order to plant a memory, you had to show that target the pages from a distance no more than two meters.
- If the target's vision was bad or they were blind or something along those lines, it would not take effect.
- It could not cause instant death.

If the father had taken out a handgun or something along those lines, he would've been in a tight spot. That is what he needed the knives for. He'd chosen that weapon when he was in the sixth year of elementary school. At the time, he had snuck into an outdoor supply shop and obtained 10 knives. He would leave the orphanage at night and develop his knife-throwing technique alone on a riverbank. The knives he had stolen from the shop were all different types, from switch-blades to knives with scabbards and of varying shapes and lengths. How difficult the knives were to throw varied based upon what type they were.

He started out by using a wooden pole he found stuck in the ground on the riverbed as a target. At first, he couldn't hit it at all even from a close range, but after a hundred tries, he finally hit his target for the first time. The knife he'd thrown spun in the

air and planted itself in the pole. That success was pure coincidence, but one success was plenty for him.

He immediately opened up the leather-bound book and read his memory of what had just occurred.

The knife left his hand and sunk into the pole. His past that had been compressed into text on the page unfolded inside his head. The exact movement of his muscles, the angle of the knife, the amount of force used; all of it was replayed in his head. In his mind, Takuma experienced his second success.

All it had been was a memory, but Takuma's body and mind had the false sense that it had actually happened. The same amount of fatigue was left in his body as when he did the first throw. The impact and sensation were carved into his mind.

After a period of several days, he vicariously felt that feeling of success. That throw was stockpiled in his mind. He had obtained an utterly clear image of success as well as the means of moving his body in order to achieve it.

He would need to adjust his throw depending on the type of knife and the distance from his target. Their centers of gravity differed and there was no set number of times they had to spin from when he let go of them to when they hit their target. He used the book to practice all of those until he'd learned to handle them as well. Before long, he could make a knife hit a target from any posture and the tool known as the knife felt like a part of his body just like blood or nerves.

Katun.... Katun...

The sound of hard shoes echoed through the lobby, approaching the first floor reading area. It wasn't the sound of any of the library staff members' shoes. It was rare for anyone to visit the library besides him at this time of day.

He stood next to the window and heard the sound of a siren as he gazed outside. He thought about what had happened so far and what was going to happen from here, and at some point the sound of the footsteps left his conscious thoughts. When he was moving to sit back down and reached out to grab the back of the chair, it happened. The chair slid sideways away from Takuma like he was being pulled by an invisible thread. Just as it had slid a few meters away, it came to a sudden halt when a man standing behind a bookcase stopped it with the bottom of his foot.

'Hey, you. Didja think ya were about ta sit here? I got somethin' I've gotta as' you. Yer name. It wouldn' happen ta be Hasumi Takuma, would it now? Yeah, I thought so. You've got that fountain pen in yer chest pocket. Kouichi told me over the phone. He said the guy might have a fountain pen in 'is chest pocket.'

It was a tall, solidly built male high school student. The man that Higashikata Jousuke and Hirose Kouichi were always with. He had both his hands shoved into his pants pockets and with one foot sitting on top of the chair, he surveyed his surroundings.

'Looks like I got here first.'

Takuma looked down at the manuscript bundle he'd left on the desk.

'Hey, didn't you know? There's no crime more grievous than interrupting a person when they're reading, Nijimura Okuyasu-kun.'

Okuyasu bared his teeth like a dog making a threat.

'Yeah, I'm pretty damn sure you're Hasumi Takuma. Hey, it ain't this chair you're gonna be sittin' in. It's gonna be a chair in an interrogation room, or maybe an electric chair, I'd say.'

He let out a sigh. These last few months had felt like an entire lifetime.

'I'd honestly like to just ignore you and keep reading my novel. But not unlike a dog, it looks like I've got to play with you or you'll make a racket barking. All right then, I'll take you on. I've got data on you. You're 178 centimeters tall, you weigh 80 kilograms, and you're a Libra. And you've probably forgotten by now, but you crushed my fountain pen with your shoe a while back. Speaking of which, did you manage to progress to 2nd year in the end? I know how bad your test scores were. Honestly, I have no idea how a person could manage to set a record low mark like that. I think the rats living around here could score better than you.'

He seemed to have some kind of special ability as well. Takuma didn't know what it was exactly, but there was no doubt in his mind that the chair sliding across the room as if drawn towards Okuyasu was because of his ability.

Okuyasu lowered the foot he'd been resting on the chair down to the ground. There were a few dozen meters between him and Takuma. The inside of the library was quiet with the heater not having much success, giving it a sharp chill. Takuma looked at his face and was newly shocked by the intensity he gave off. Okuyasu was a hard-faced man with insect-like eyes.

'That trimmed hair and that thick neck... You honestly look like a totem pole. I swear that face of yours looks just like the one on a totem pole I saw on field day when I was in elementary school. I think I remember that kids used to pee on it.'

Okuyasu's eyes went half closed. With his mouth half open, he bent his neck and it let out a *kukih* sound.

'Pretty hilarious story ya got there. Well, now I'll be able to "scrape" without holding back.'

The chained bull had just broken free. Takuma was glad he'd brought knives along. The ones he'd had hidden in his jacket were new ones he'd bought half a year ago that were extremely lethal. If he was able to hit the heart, he could kill Okuyasu in a single attack. With only tables and chairs in the reading area, there were no obstacles to hide behind. And the knives were easy to throw.

The act of taking out the knife from his jacket and the act of throwing it was one fluid motion. The throwing knife he released from his right hand rotated in the air towards Okuyasu. It was a silver-colored knife with the same metal from blade to hilt. The center of gravity was in the blade, so when he threw it from the hilt, it allowed it to

quickly pick up speed. The moment after the knife left his hand, it arrived in front of Okuyasu's nose. But it did not hit its target. Just before the tip was about to plunge into his skin, it suddenly vanished into thin air. Okuyasu hadn't made the slightest move; his expression didn't even change.

Somewhere along the line, as if overlapping with his body, another human was standing there. But not a real human. It had the exact same height and stature as Okuyasu, but the shape of its head and the ornamentation on its skin indicated it wasn't human. It was like a mannequin created in CG.

'So he erased it?'

The moment the knife disappeared, the human-shaped thing standing next to Okuyasu moved its right arm, appearing to brush it away with the palm of its hand as easily as if he was swatting an annoying fly. That knife Takuma was sure would reach its target, disappeared as if sucked into its palm. It wasn't knocked out of the air onto the ground or flicked far away, either. Without making a sound, like it just melted away on the spot, it disappeared in mid-air.

'Ya hear that? From the sound 'a The Hand's breathing, he wants ta scrape away a lot more. Next time, it'll be your entire body.'

Kooooooh. Takuma could hear that human-shaped thing's creepy breathing. It stood in a leisurely pose that gave off no sense of its body having weight. This was probably the same kind of thing as his leather-bound book, meaning that it couldn't be seen by ordinary humans. It hovered just next to Okuyasu like a guardian spirit, its expression distinctly non-human and inorganic. It was closer to the face of an insect than that of a human. Or like a robot made of tin. There are probably as many people that could tell what it was thinking as there are people who can tell what calculators think about.

'So its name is The Hand, huh?'

He didn't reply. Sensing it would be dangerous to approach, Takuma kept his distance. Just as he stepped back, thinking he would hide between the book cases, it happened.

The Hand moved once again. It thrust its right arm out towards Takuma, spreading its fingers. As if wiping invisible dust out of the air, he swung his hand down. There had been quite a big space between Takuma and Okuyasu, so The Hand's hand didn't reach Takuma. He had simply swung his hand from up high to down low a considerable distance away from him.

But that instant, something strange happened. He was certain he was far away from Okuyasu, but he suddenly realized the space between them had shrunk. Okuyasu hadn't moved a single centimeter from where he was earlier. Even though he'd been stepping back, Takuma was the one that had gone closer to Okuyasu. Not only did he not move back, he'd moved forward two meters closer to Okuyasu.

The Hand, remaining close to Okuyasu, moved its hand from high to low, the same move it had done earlier. Then with a sudden *woosh*, Takuma's view had changed. Okuyasu's body suddenly appeared larger. He hadn't taken a single step, but his body had moved several steps closer to Okuyasu. The distance between the two of them was now half what it was at the outset.

It was the same phenomenon as with the chair earlier. When the human-shaped phantom moved its hand and the chair slid across the floor, Takuma's body had been drawn closer to Okuyasu. He wasn't sure if the 'scraping' ability he mentioned had to do with this or not. But at this rate, Takuma was going to get pulled toward him, and he had to avoid getting any closer to that creepy palm. There were all these detailed lines on his palm in a pattern that made it look like a contour map. An eerie feeling permeated the air and when Takuma strained his ears, he thought he could hear the same sound you hear when you listen closely to a deep hole coming from The Hand's right hand. Like the low howling of the wind in a deep, dark abyss.

Just as The Hand looked to be moving its hand again, Takuma grabbed a nearby chair and flung it at The Hand with all his might. The spontaneous move was surprisingly effective.

The Hand's hand was knocked down by the chair, with the wooden part of the chair that had touched its palm disappearing with a *ZUZUZUZUZU* sound. But the parts that were not scraped away splintered into pieces and rained down on Okuyasu.

Clicking his tongue, Okuyasu pulled his hands out of his pants pockets and stopped the fragments with his arms.

In that moment when Okuyasu's attention was drawn off of Takuma to focus on his own well-being, Takuma left the reading space where the tables and chairs were and jumped into the closely-arranged bookshelves. If he could reach his arm out and attack a long distance, he would've done so a long time ago. Because he couldn't do that, he was trying to draw his enemy in before attacking them.

The leather-bound book worked in the same way in that its effect wouldn't take hold unless you were at close range. But Okuyasu's ability to scrape away his opponent was dangerous. If Takuma got in his range, he was likely to be the one coming out the loser. He would get sucked in and then have his very being erased like the knife or the chair from earlier. He couldn't let The Hand's palm near him at any cost.

Takuma had 2 knives left in his jacket. But would it really be possible for him to hit Okuyasu with one of them in a way that would render him no longer able to fight? If he couldn't get in close, he would have to deal a fatal blow remotely.

At that moment, he heard a voice so close that it sounded like someone was whispering to him in his ear.

'I heard about yer Stand. They said you can write memories into yer opponent's brains. I dunno how ya fight with it, but you're supposed ta be able ta make it like your opponent was in a traffic accident. That true?'

The voice came from the other side of the bookshelf he'd been leaning on. Sensing a threat, Takuma hurried away from there and threw himself down on the floor. The next thing he knew, the center of the bookcase his back had been leaning on was scraped away in one swift horizontal swing. It was as if a giant chisel had just gouged out a huge chunk of the bookcase and the books along with it. It was a very fine cut, with not a single bit of wood or paper flying astray the moment after it was done. And on the other side of the hole, Okuyasu's face was visible. He looked down on Takuma with those bug-like eyes.

How long ago had it been when the orphanage director had said those things to him? She was a pious Christian, and she had told him that a creator was always looking down on the world and that those who had committed sins would be punished. The boys he'd lived with had believed that, but he did not.

The bookshelf collapsed with a loud clatter. It fell to the floor as the books in the upper half poured out of it. The aisles between the bookshelves were now scattered with the corpses of scraped books.

Takuma ran to get some distance and called out his leather-bound book. The dark brown book rose from his palm like a submarine surfacing from underwater. Okuyasu had uttered the word *Stand*. Maybe that's what these phantoms were called? He opened up his leather-bound book and re-read an experience he'd just had. There was a description of all of The Hand's movements. He re-analyzed how it had scraped away his knife and the bookcase with the palm of its hand.

What a creepy ability. That palm with those intricate patterns on it could seemingly annihilate any substance regardless of the strength of its material. Its targets weren't repelled nor did they show any reaction at all. They simply got sucked into the palm and disappeared like sinking into a swamp. From what he saw, it seemed The Hand could annihilate life without making it feel fear or pain.

Takuma searched for a way to slip through Okuyasu's defenses from far away and take him down. Using the leather-bound book, reconnaissance was an easy task., He could relive anything he'd seen just once precisely, down to the finest details. Before long, when he'd found habits that The Hand possessed, something popped into his head that he'd wanted to say to the orphanage director.

If there was a God, then He shouldn't let the deeply sinful live. It was because He *didn't* exist that Takuma had to risk his life to do it himself. But he kept that thought quiet from the director and his friends. All he knew was the leather-bound book that turned his own mind into articles and descriptions.

Takuma placed his hand on the leather-bound book.

'After all we've been through, how about I name you, as well? After all, you've been by my side my whole life, watching me.'

He used The Hand for reference when choosing it, as he saw that name as simple and strong.

'Our battle starts now. Are you ready, The Book?'

Okuyasu's footsteps moved towards the lobby. Listening closely, Takuma heard what sounded like an iron pole being twisted. Okuyasu was probably messing with the front door so it couldn't be opened. Holding his breath, Takuma could hear Okuyasu's voice.

'Ta be honest, I never had much ta do with these library places before. I *did* know there was a place like this around, though. What the hell's the world got so many books for? There's gotta be books here that somebody took all this time to write that nobody ever read, right?'

'I have a question. Did you just seal the front entrance?'

'Those two people that looked like they work here. I passed by 'em before. I thought I'd better do that so they don't come back in. It'd be a pain if somebody else got involved, right? But don't forget, I also did that it so you couldn' run away.'

His quiet voice meandered and echoed between the bookshelves. Takuma was hiding in the Japanese literature section. His back was right up against a shelf of books lined up in Japanese syllabary order. What was particularly attractive about that spot was the fire extinguisher installed at his feet.

'Aren't your comrades supposed to be coming?'

'I'll figure something out fer them. Now come on out. I been lookin' fer ya with all my ally Stand users. You ain't gonna be able ta live in this town anymore. Not that yer gonna be able ta live in some other town, neither. After killin' people like you have, ya better not expect ta go on livin' a normal life from here on out.'

Step by step, the footsteps came closer. Judging from the loudness of his voice, Okuyasu must've been about 20 meters away. Takuma took the two knives out of his jacket. Both of them were throwing knives. One was silver, the other was black and made of carbon. Besides these two knives, he had no weapons left.

'How many of these Stand user people are there in this town?'

As he talked, he reread parts of The Book. The scene of Okuyasu shaving away the chair reopened in his head. He examined the scene, playing it out in a delayed, frame-by-frame sort of way. He had a consciousness of himself reliving the past vicariously through this vision, as well as a separate consciousness looking down on the scene from above.

He threw the chair. The Hand scraped part of it away. The part that his palm didn't touch was left as small splinters which flew towards Okuyasu.

The dust that was floating nearby moved in a very strange way. A lot like when you slide open a sliding glass door and the air on the other side rushes toward you, the dust moved towards Okuyasu in an instant. Takuma's body was also pulled towards Okuyasu at the same time, altering his perspective.

Perhaps when The Hand's palm had passed through it, even air was scraped away, leaving a vacuum in its place? Then as the air surged into that vacuum, other matter slid towards it as if being sucked in? That's what he'd thought at first, but now he was reconsidering.

If it were a simple vacuum, then wind would blow and the dust floating in the air would curl into disorderly swirls. But what Takuma could see in his vision was some of the dust just shifted positions and no other effects. No vacuum had been created.

What The Hand's right palm scraped away was not matter. Likely, what it did erase was something more philosophical that humans had difficulty perceiving. If he had to put it into words, he would say it was *space itself*. The metaphysical concept of space was what he scraped away with that hand.

It didn't even allow a vacuum to be created. It was utter "deletion." When it happened, it was like somebody had pushed the backspace key on a computer keyboard. The space past what was scraped away was shifted into its place. When the space you're in is drawn toward Okuyasu like that, it brings your body with it. He sucks his enemies in so he can deliver the finishing blow. His reach is short enough that he can't get attacks in on you unless you're in close range, but he probably made up for it with that tactic.

"Ey, not that I care all that much, but why'd you kill a person? That Orikasa lady?"

He heard Okuyasu's voice from across the bookshelves. 20 meters away. He was approaching the alleyway.

'If I tell you why, will you let me go? I'd really like to get back to my reading.'

'Sorry, no can do. But if you just sit tight fer a bit, you'll be able to do all the readin' ya want—when yer in prison.'

'You'd better just think of me as a cold-blooded killer, then.'

5 meters away. He could tell by the sound of the footsteps. It was essential that he keep track of his distance from his opponent. When he threw a knife, it would spin in the air—the blade and the handle constantly swapping places. If it was not the blade portion that hit when it made contact, it wouldn't succeed in stabbing anything. In order to make sure the blade hit the opponent, he needed to measure his distance from his opponent.

'Say, Okuyasu-kun. I heard your big brother died last summer. He wasn't perchance *killed* by someone, was he? He seemed like the kinda guy who'd have a lot of enemies, that brother 'a yours.'

He'd gotten several hits from his search in The Book for rumors circulating about Okuyasu. His big brother's reputation was the worst one. He could hear Okuyasu's low voice coming from across the bookcases.

'Just try 'n say anythin' else about my Bro, ya piece 'a shit. I'll scrape ya away so bad that they won't find a single shred of ya left.'

'Sorry. Did that make you mad? You're pretty hot-blooded, aren't you?'

With his hand squeezing the hilt of the knife, Takuma stepped out from behind the bookcase. Okuyasu was standing a ways into the alleyway. He was breathing violently through his nose like a raging bull. When Takuma came into his field of view, he yelled, 'You got me pissed off!'

'This is just a rumor I heard, but is it true your big brother died by electrocution on top of some power lines? What was he doing at a place like that? Was he into voyeurism or something?'

An experienced knife-thrower knew precisely how far his knife would go in one rotation. As long as you didn't snap your wrist when you threw it, it would maintain a fixed number of rotations over a said distance. In Takuma's case, his knife would travel 3.5 meters per rotation. With the blade and the hilt constantly changing places in the air, he had to use this number in order to make sure the blade was what first made contact. So with that number being 3.5 meters, if Takuma threw his knife when he was a multiple of that many meters away from his opponent, he was certain he could hit them with the blade.

'What, you get shy all of a sudden? Say something!'

With Takuma's provocation, like magma welling up in the mouth of a volcano, the vein in his temple began to pulsate. 'You're dead meat!' he yelled as he closed the distance between them in one spurt. He was attacking simply head-on like a bull or a boar.

Using the gaps between bookshelves as a distance scale, he measured the distance between them. He held the hilt of the knife with a loose grip. Throwing knives are designed with being thrown in mind. They're heavier than normal knives and stick in their targets more easily. Because the center of gravity was more towards the blade, they're suited for being thrown at high speeds. There's no need to throw it from the blade as is often seen in movies and the like.

Taking their distance and the speed at which Okuyasu was moving towards him into account, he threw the first knife. The silver throwing knife left Takuma's hand, completed a full rotation at precisely 3.5 meters, and then a second full rotation occurred at 7.0 meters. The light of a fluorescent lamp making it glisten as it glided through the air between the bookshelves on a direct route to Okuyasu's heart.

Okuyasu's arm blurred, became two, and the human-shaped phantom appeared. The Hand's right palm swung wildly from high to low, drawing an arc in the air. The silver knife, along with everything physically occupying that space, was annihilated. The knife disappeared from the world, and all that was left was the blank space left in The Hand's wake. No, not even blank space was there. There was still no word to describe what it was.

The knife being erased was within the scope of his calculations, however.

It happened while Hand's palm was still low to the ground. Okuyasu opened his eyes and the black knife Takuma had thrown silently just after the first one finally entered his field of vision. But it was too late.

Space rushed towards the path of annihilation made by The Hand and along with it came the hard-to-see black knife.

He'd thrown the first knife for it to get erased. It was the second knife he'd put all his focus into. He'd taken into account the speed with which it was moving towards Okuyasu as well as how much space would be scraped away. Otherwise the rotations of the knife would have been upset, and the blade would not have hit its target at the optimal angle. But his adjustments were well placed. Accelerating by riding on the spatial shift, the knife drew closer to Okuyasu at a high speed.

Takuma had identified something through his observations using The Book. The Hand had a habit of taking big swings. When its palm was scraping something away, it would swing its arm down, drawing a big arc in the air. Once it was swung down, it required some time, just a little, before it could return to an attack posture. Perhaps it was a tradeoff for the incredible destructive power that was being able to annihilate space. In that short stretch of time, the knife slipped by The Hand's arm.

The Hand could not react in time. The black knife's blade tilted into a third rotation. It was not off from its intended course. Once the third rotation ended, it should pierce Okuyasu's heart.

But that would not come to pass. In the next moment, Okuyasu made a move Takuma could hardly believe. Okuyasu leaned his body forward *towards* the knife, accelerating even further, and lunged forward. It was like he was trying to purposefully dive into it.

The knife connected and stabbed his school uniform. It was clear immediately that it was not a fatal wound. Okuyasu didn't even stop, he just kept charging forward. The blade hadn't reached his heart. A moment after it stabbed his chest, it fell to the floor, merely making a cut into the skin on Okuyasu's chest.

If it had hit him at a direct angle, Okuyasu would likely have been killed instantly. But the angle of impact was shallow. It was off from the point of contact Takuma had intended by the change in distance due to Okuyasu lunging forward and accelerating.

Okuyasu had reduced the distance between him and Takuma down to 5 meters. As if floating out of his body, the human-shaped phantom appeared in mid-air, wildly swung its right hand up, and prepared to scrape away once again. Its face had no expression, like an uncouth machine. It seemed like it was going to unscrupulously erase everything in sight. The Hand swung its hand down. It was not a distance at which it would reach Takuma. He was trying to suck him in along with the space he occupied. He wanted to pull Takuma into his range and then strike the finishing blow. This was Okuyasu and The Hand's fundamental battle strategy.

Installed next to Takuma's feet was a fire extinguisher. Just as the space was about to be gouged out, he picked it up and threw it. The Hand only slightly caught the side of the cylindrical fire extinguisher as it scraped the space away. Okuyasu made a 'tsk' sound and white smoke burst out. The whole area was covered in white in the blink of an eye.

Takuma decided to get some distance between him and Okuyasu so he could regain his composure. There was only one problem. He didn't have a single knife left.

Just how few people could there be in this world that would lunge forward at a knife coming straight towards them? Takuma had been fully trying not to underestimate his opponent, but somewhere deep down he may have been looking down on him. Because of that, his attack had been thwarted.

'Don't tell me that old book you were just holding in one of yer hands is your Stand? Don't try ta act dumb on me now, I only got a glimpse, but I saw it.'

Okuyasu's voice rang out from inside the white smoke. Between lined up book cases were round pillars reminiscent of ancient ruins. Next to one of those, Takuma concealed himself. Things like walls may not be useful against The Hand's attacks, but Takuma was careful not to come out from behind the pillar as he glanced in Okuyasu's direction.

Takuma wanted to pick up the carbon throwing knife that had fallen to the floor while the smoke from the fire extinguisher was still hanging in the air. If he'd had it in his hands right now, he probably would've thrown it at Okuyasu. Even with his vision limited, he could tell Okuyasu's distance and direction by his voice. With those two pieces of information, he could hit his target with precision. But in order to get to where the knife was lying, he would have to slip right by Okuyasu. At this stage, he had to give up on that idea.

Now that he'd thrown all his knives, the only weapon at his disposal that could cause fatal damage was his leather-bound book, The Book. But in order for his opponent to decipher the book's text and have memories planted in them, he had to get to just 2 meters away from them.

2 meters. A distance that was within The Hand's attack range. Entering that range meant the possibility of being deleted by the backspace key at any moment.

His stomach felt like it did a flip. If he'd looked up the description of his feelings in The Book, he could learn exactly what was going on within him internally right now. According to The Book, a fear in his heart was growing to a size he could not ignore. The kind where if he'd let his arms or legs go limp, they would start shaking. But his determination to overcome Okuyasu was fully formed in that heart. And if that's what The Book described his internal feelings to be, that's what they really were.

'When you interrupted my reading, you were like a noisy dog to me. But now I'm thinking of this as something like a graduation exam. Tomorrow morning, my mother's revenge will be complete. And then my life will truly start.'

In these ten years, he'd run across barely any obstacles. By using The Book, he could generally silence any opponent instantly. But this man standing in front of him now was different. If Takuma dropped his guard, he would be in danger of losing his life. But it had to be this way. This fear was going to be worth it in the end.

'How do ya use that book Stand? Looks like ya can't use it without bein' at close range, at least.'

The white smoke was gradually dissipating, allowing him to see some book shelves and Okuyasu's silhouette. From the silhouette standing at attention, he heard a quiet voice.

'If that thing were a long-range Stand, then ya sure as hell would've attacked by now. Oh yeah, I think Kouichi said somethin' er other about you takin' yer jacket off when ya kill somebody? Ya plugged the memory of gettin' hit by a car in somebody through a window pane, right? Ya weren't takin' yer jacket off ta show 'em those scars, were ya? Like maybe ta get their attention so they come over?'

It wasn't the scars, it was the birthmark on his shoulder that he'd shown her. But he wasn't too far off the mark. Among The Book's three special traits, he'd gotten one right: the fact that he had to show his target the pages from close range.

Apparently, he'd heard from his friend that he couldn't kill instantaneously. He had no idea by what means they were able to draw that conclusion, but somehow they were aware of his ability to implant memories into people like copying files from a hard drive. From that, they would be able to deduce the fact that he couldn't kill instantly.

The question now was the last trait: that without visual comprehension, The Book would not have its effect. If he wasn't able to defeat them before they learned this fact, he could be in trouble.

When the fire extinguisher's white smoke had completely dissipated, the white soot-covered bookshelves, floor, and counters became clearly visible, but Okuyasu was nowhere in sight. He had moved between the bookshelves, looking for Takuma.

Now that he didn't have a single knife left, he had no hope for victory outside rendering Okuyasu unable to fight by using The Book. And in order to do that, Takuma would have to slip through The Hand's attack, get right up next to him, and clearly display the pages of the book in front of Okuyasu's eyes. The image of the postcard came into his mind. The field of grass. It stretched out as far as the eye could see, not bound by any walls. His breathing eased just a little.

He could hear footsteps coming from behind him. Suddenly, the attack began. The pillar Takuma had been hiding behind was scraped away while barely making a sound. The surface it left was as smooth as though a hot knife had sliced through butter. Takuma had started moving just a moment sooner and put some space between

them. On the other side of the scraped-away pillar was a figure as huge as a bear. Takuma ran along the bookshelves at the border of the reading space.

'Quit scamperin' all over the place!'

He was gripping the black carbon knife in his right hand. It was the one that just earlier had fallen on the floor after narrowly avoided piercing him in the chest. He must've picked it up while he was moving between the bookshelves.

Okuyasu threw the knife with all his might. Seeing the way he held and threw it, Takuma could tell he wasn't adept at knife throwing. Of course, it missed its target. It crossed through an area quite far-off from Takuma and then fell safely to the floor near a bookshelf without stabbing anyone.

'Hey, knives aren't things you should be just throwing around, you know!'

Takuma promptly rolled to the side. Immediately after, a fairly large wooden table was thrown at him and Takuma heard the sound of it being crushed to pieces. A second later and he would've been in the middle of that. That human-shaped phantom could do more than just scrape things away, it apparently also had super-human physical strength.

He got up, and caught his breath. Takuma was more of a humanities kind of guy, so he wasn't all that used to moving his body this much.

'Did your dead brother have one of these Stand things, too?'

'Don't talk about my Big Bro. It's like yer dirtyin' his name and it pisses me off.'

With around 10 meters between them now, he faced off against Okuyasu once again. He looked like he wanted to get this over with already, and Takuma preferred it that way. He was constantly running in order to put distance between the two of them, so he would probably be the first one to collapse in exhaustion.

Okuyasu sidled toward him. His breathing, on the other hand, wasn't heavy at all. The distance between them was down to 6 meters. The Hand was practically right in front of him.

Takuma opened up The Book's leather cover. Making the book's pages flip simply by willing it in his mind, he reached the memory that could reap Okuyasu's consciousness in an instant. But he left that page facing down. He had to make sure that memory didn't enter his vision.

The 'forbidden sections'. His past experiences which, when read, would cause spiritual or physical harm. He'd made Orikasa Hanae read from a page of a forbidden section. The Hand attacked by drawing an arc in the air and it was always a big, sweeping motion. If he could just get around that, it would leave an opening. He had to somehow make it past that arm and plant a memory from a forbidden section into his mind. Just a quick glance at it, and the battle would be over.

Okuyasu was now just 4 meters away. Takuma took a step forward as well, and confronted him. He had a good look at Okuyasu's face. He could see him breathing and felt the momentum of his body.

'What kind of relationship did you have with your older brother? I'm a little curious. I've got a little sister myself, you see. Her name is Chiho. I'm pretty glad I didn't end up having a little brother with a face like yours. I can't imagine that would've been all that pleasant.'

'Ain't you supposed ta have a good memory? Maybe I got some bad info, 'cause I swear I told ya ya'd better not bad-mouth my big brother again.'

'Are you saying my memory isn't good? Well I think I'd object to that, but whatever. Your big brother, he really put up with a lot didn't he? Having a little brother with not only that face, but a brain right behind it that isn't exactly the pick of the litter either.'

He watched and waited for Okuyasu to react. Maybe he would just suddenly swing his arm down or maybe his head was still calm. Takuma went on.

'Hey, why's your brother so important to you? Just because you've got the same blood running in your veins? So what? Did your big brother even actually care about you? I'll bet he didn't give a rat's ass about you, did he?'

Okuyasu had long since been making a face like he'd snapped. He clearly still cared quite a bit about his deceased brother. By poking that sore spot, his anger would probably explode like the pus from a popped zit. Good, he sensed. This would be far easier for him if Okuyasu went into a blind rage and charged at him like a big dumb beast.

The attack began. First, The Hand swung its arm down. Its palm was still far enough away that it would not reach Takuma. It sucked in the space, a move meant to draw Takuma into Okuyasu's attack range. Takuma stopped just short of it, and the moment The Hand's arm swung fully down, jumped to the side. Okuyasu made a face like he'd been hit in his blind spot. Okuyasu felt the space Takuma had just occupied shift towards him. But this wasn't a phenomenon that could be perceived with the eyes. Nothing was on the conveyor belt The Hand had created; it was a swing and a miss.

Takuma had almost fully deciphered The Hand's ability. There was a rule to his ability of shifting space towards himself. The space that shifted was always in a straight line directly in front of where his arm swung down. So if Takuma moved one body's width to the side, he wouldn't get sucked in. And the price The Hand paid for a whiff was big.

The pages of The Book flipped at high-speed as it sat on Takuma's hand. It would open the page of his choosing simply by him willing it. A moment later, it had arrived at a forbidden section.

He took a step towards Okuyasu. The distance between them was now down to 2 meters, putting them both within each other's attack range.

He held out the book, certain it was within Okuyasu's field of vision.

Then, just as he was sure of his victory, something unexpected happened.

Okuyasu shut his eyes tight. That was the greatest defense one could put up against The Book, which could not plant memories in its target unless they could see it. He'd realized it; the last characteristic of The Book. And Takuma had a good guess as to when he'd figured it out. It was just earlier when The Hand had missed him and destroyed a fire extinguisher instead. Takuma had chosen to retreat, rather than attack despite being from close range at that point. With the extinguishing agent shrouding the atmosphere, Okuyasu wouldn't have been able to physically see the pages. Now that attacking with The Book was impossible, Takuma had no choice but to back off. Because Takuma hadn't attacked with his Stand then, Okuyasu must've come to the conclusion that Takuma *couldn't* have done so because he had his eyes closed. He had probably recognized it, being used to fights like these. Or maybe he figured it out by pure instinct. Either way, he'd prevented Takuma's attack.

With all the willpower he had, Takuma canceled his step towards Okuyasu and the Hand's clenched fist grazed the tip of his nose. If he'd noticed a moment later, it would've been over.

Okuyasu had been intending to lie in wait with his eyes closed from the beginning. He'd realized he'd missed his target as it had slid down the conveyor belt, so instead he was going to try breaking the whole counter. It was clear to Takuma that Okuyasu had the instincts of a wild beast.

The Hand's hand reached out. It wasn't the big swing he used when he was erasing things, it was trying to catch its target to keep it from moving. The Hand's fingers caught the brim of Takuma's coat pocket. In an instant, it was too late to retreat. The Hand's leg kicked upwards and the wind pressure from it caused the air to warp. The fabric of his jacket tore and his pocket was torn off from the seam. As the tips of its fingers grazed Takuma's neck, the air pressure tore his skin.

Takuma now faced a choice. With Okuyasu's eyes closed, he was sticking his fists out where he thought Takuma probably was. As long as Okuyasu's eyelids were shut, The Book would not work. What was there he could do against a man who had renounced his eyesight?

1: just run away immediately (Couldn't be done).

2: hit Okuyasu from behind while his eyes were closed (If he couldn't knock Okuyasu out in one hit, he could be sure he'd get hit back. And Takuma didn't think he had the muscle strength to do it in one hit).

3: go find a weapon he could use to render Okuyasu unable to continue fighting with one attack (This one's good).

Takuma turned around and broke into a run. There was a weapon right nearby. If he could pierce his opponent with it, the fight would be over, and hitting Okuyasu with his eyes closed should be even easier than hitting a wooden post.

It had been Okuyasu himself that had carried the black carbon knife there. He had no ability to hit anything with it, yet he'd gone out of his way to throw it. The knife

was lying at the base of a bookshelf. It was a shelf packed full of old books by authors of the distant past. As he ran to pick it up, a twinge of doubt ran across his mind.

Right now, victory was assured. But it's moments like that where it's easiest to slip up. Okuyasu was a vulgar person who didn't have enough brains to power a Christmas light. But was that all he was? No. If that were all he was, this battle would've been over long ago.

He quietly checked The Book. Quickly flipping through the pages, he found the description he was looking for. It was a description that had formed from an event that had happened less than a minute earlier. The moment Okuyasu had thrown the knife with all his might. He searched everything that had been in the scope of his vision. Okuyasu had certainly experienced many failures in his life up to this point, so it was likely he'd learned some things from them, like the fact that acting purely on anger was a bad idea. Then Takuma discovered something he hadn't noticed earlier: the movements of Okuyasu's eyes. The moment he threw the knife, he glanced not at Takuma, but at the bookshelf behind him.

He would have to rethink his plan. This time, treating Nijimura Okuyasu as a man deserving of his respect. Okuyasu hadn't intended to hit him with it to begin with. He was aware of the fact that he didn't have the skill to hit his opponent. He had a firm grasp of his own abilities and judged what he should and should not do. Okuyasu had put out bait so he would know where Takuma would go even if he closed his eyes.

When he arrived in front of the bookcase and went to pick up the knife on the floor, he heard Okuyasu's voice behind him.

'Yep. Knew ya'd go pick that thing up. That knife was yer last one, huh?'

Okuyasu was standing 5 meters behind him. He'd already opened his eyes and was staring at Takuma, making a face like everything had just gone exactly as he'd planned.

'I was pretty sure ya would 'a thrown any others a long time ago if ya had any still on ya. Since ya weren't throwin' anymore, I figured ya must 'a been all out.'

Like an animal that had picked the right direction on pure instinct, Okuyasu was one step ahead of him. Next to him, like it was performing a solemn execution, The Hand started to move. Its palms to his fingertips were covered in that creepy pattern. When it moved as if to draw a line in the air, the surface of his palm went *ZUZUZUZUZU* as it scraped away space. It swallowed everything in its path, leaving nothing behind. He had no idea where the things went after that. It was a hand of God that scraped away every idea, thought, and logic.

The bookshelf packed with old books stood out from the rest. It wasn't a small shelf; it was the kind of bookcase so big you'd need a good few adults to carry it. Yet that bookcase was hoisted into the air and stood still. To the palm of The Hand, weight had no meaning. It moved things along with all the space around it.

It was a lot like the sort of trap you'd use to catch a bird. One of those simply-made traps that just use bait, a box, and a stick. Then when the bird pecks at the food, you pull out the stick with a string, causing the box fall, thus trapping the bird inside. The knife was the bait for luring in the bird. Even with his eyes closed, Okuyasu could predict that Takuma would head towards the knife.

The light of the fluorescent bulbs was blocked by the shelf hovering above him, casting Takuma in a huge shadow. That huge mass tilted in the air and started to tumble down. Its massive weight pressed on his shoulders and he felt the sensation of his bones breaking. The old books spilled out of the shelves and fell apart from the impact. Pages scattered all over like confetti and the tremor-like sound it made when it hit the ground caused the floor to slightly warp.

Takuma lay face down between the bookshelf and the floor like a squashed fly. It took considerable effort just to breathe with the enormous weight pressing down on him. His right shoulder and everything from his neck up were sticking out from the edge of the shelf, but his head was buried in the fallen-apart books. Torn scraps of pages were spread all over like the base of a mountain where an avalanche had just taken place.

After the shelf had completely fallen down, it was quiet. All he heard was Okuyasu's footsteps and the rustle of the pages fluttering around in midair.

He was lucky he hadn't lost consciousness. He wasn't going to be able to run from under a collapsed bookshelf. In order to make Okuyasu think the battle was over, he had to put up with this weight. He knew it was going to fall on him before it happened, so he was able to guard his head so he didn't lose consciousness. Now all he needed was for Okuyasu to gloat over his victory.

5 meters away from him, he saw the tips of Okuyasu's shoes come to a stop. He was probably wary about getting near just in case of an attack from The Book. Still pinned to the floor, Takuma looked up at the tall figure.

With a refreshed look on his face, he said, 'So, how's it feel ta get your ass totally handed to ya? A real high-pressure situation you're in, huh? With you stuck there, I could beat your ass even with my eyes closed. I think I did a pretty awesome job this time. I thought fer a sec ya might not go pick it up when I threw it, but looks like ya did. Now I'm gonna make sure you take a little nap before you get a chance ta crawl outta there...'

As he spoke, Okuyasu put his hand up to his mouth and let out a cough.

The sound echoed throughout the quiet reading room.

'...Oh, have you caught a cold, Okuyasu-kun?'

Just speaking aloud made a pain bad enough to make his head swim pierce through his body. He tried to lift the bookcase off of him with his free right arm, but it wouldn't budge.'

'Did you...'

Okuyasu held his hand to the side of his head and his gaze wandered around the room. He still hadn't noticed he had started sniffing. He had an expression on his face like he was daydreaming.

He'd finished vicariously experiencing Takuma's memory. It only took a moment, so for most people they never even realized a mass of someone else's memories had been written into theirs. It was a sensation not unlike *déjà vu*.

'Sure is cold in here, isn't it? A guy could catch a cold here in no time. But anyhow, let me lay everything on the line. The battle's over. The scene that just enveloped your consciousness was an event from the past that's ballooned inside your head. Your body already believes it. That's what's happening to you right now.'

Okuyasu's doubled over and he let out three hacking coughs. As he seemed to become aware of the changes in his condition, his expression changed.

'The Book cannot move by itself. I mean, it's just a book after all. That's why I've had it in my hand this whole time. But that doesn't mean it's not possible for it to move far away. As long as it's within 30 meters of me, it won't disappear.'

The changes started to get drastic. A cold sweat surfaced on Okuyasu's forehead, and then he finally fell to his knees. He glared at Takuma and looked like he was trying to say something, but with the coughs coming one after another, it didn't look like he could talk.

'Even after you crushed me with the bookcase, you made sure to keep a distance of 2 meters. But it wasn't *me* you had to keep that distance from; it was The Book. And pages of The Book entered your line of sight.'

Trying to crawl on the floor using only his right arm, Takuma attempted to get out from under the bookcase. He felt sharp pains in the places where there were broken bones. He couldn't get out from under the weight right away, but going a few centimeters at a time, he managed to slide himself out.

'I ended up in that condition when I was 12 years old. The symptoms are chills, fever, headaches, muscular pain... And in under a minute now, you're going to lose consciousness. Hey, you've never heard of the Spanish flu, have you?'

Okuyasu was delirious with fever and The Hand, which had been huddled next to him, had disappeared somewhere along the line. Among the scattered books, Okuyasu was on his knees with tears, mucus, and sweat dripping down his face.

'From 1918 to 1919, a certain disease spread to become a global pandemic. 600 million people were infected and over 40 million people died from it. And that was the Spanish flu. Though now it's just called influenza, or simply "the flu."'

He pulled himself all the way out from under the bookshelf. He stood up, and trying to put up with the pain, looked down at Okuyasu's face. Right now, he wasn't dangerous to him. What was dangerous was leaving The Book laying on the ground with a forbidden section open. If it so much as entered into the corner of Takuma's vision, he would end up just like Okuyasu.

'I won thanks to you. You delivered victory to me.'

If only one book had fell, then Okuyasu would've been more wary of it, and probably would've closed his eyes. Takuma couldn't have asked for anything better than having the bookcase tipped over and tons of books spilling out everywhere. In an environment like that, The Book could be used like a landmine. Really, there was no better environment for it.

Just before Takuma was squashed by the bookshelf, he placed The Book on the floor with its pages open and slid it in Okuyasu's direction. He was sure Okuyasu would come a short distance away from him in order to look down on him face-down on the floor.

Takuma called out an order. 'The Book, close your cover.'

Even with no one touching it, a book right in front of Okuyasu's eyes closed all on its own. There was no title on that leather cover. A look of surprise appeared on Okuyasu's face. He hadn't noticed it. Slipped in among all those books, he'd overlooked this world's most dangerous book sitting opened on the floor.

Okuyasu tried to reach his hand out to the leather-bound book, but it was too late. The flu had sapped all his stamina and Takuma collected the book before that hand could reach it.

He checked the places with the broken bones. His left shoulder and right shin were busted. By some stroke of luck, the fountain pen in his chest pocket was all right. He picked up the black throwing knife and put it away in his uniform jacket. His right pocket had torn and some of the fabric had disappeared entirely. He remembered how The Hand's finger had caught on it and had torn it off earlier. Then Takuma sighed, thinking about what a rough time he'd just gone through.

'I don't really feel like reading after all that. I'll be taking my leave. I've got to get ready for tomorrow, when I'll be leaving this town.'

As Okuyasu drooled, he moved his lips and managed to mutter something. Takuma could read lips, so he was just able to make it out.

'Hey, watch your tongue. You couldn't even print a book with words as foul as those.'

Okuyasu covered his face with his arm and curled his body up to stave off the chills, but before long, he became still in that position. He was face down on the floor covering his face with his arm, so Takuma couldn't tell what sort of face he was making.

Takuma collected the partially-read manuscript that Chiho had written and put it in his bag. Dragging his feet, he passed in front of the counter through to the lobby. He wasn't bleeding, but there were masses of heat in the places that had been injured.

The entrance doors were massive things like the doors of a prison. Up close, he realized they weren't in their usual state. The handles had been jammed with a metal rod and bent through incredible brute force. It was definitely not something he could open on his own power. Okuyasu had done this shortly before. With The Hand's

strength, bending a metal rod was probably quite a simple task. But he and The Book didn't have the strength needed to do that.

He looked for another exit, but they had all been messed with so they wouldn't open. All the side entrances in the first floor hallways had warped door frames and wouldn't budge. All of these were no doubt Okuyasu's work as well. This sure was annoying. He didn't have any way out of the Thorn Building. It had those black cast iron lattices on the windows, so nothing bigger than a rat could pass through them.

He couldn't just stay here; Okuyasu's friends would be here soon. He called out The Book to search his memory for some passage outside, and only one possibility surfaced.

Takuma went back to the lobby and looked up at the spiral staircase. The wooden hand rail drew an elegant curve as it rose up the atrium, connecting to the second and third floors.

Three months earlier, he had gone with Chiho to the third floor to look for the "groaning book" in a room that looked like it was the underside of a roof. Back then, a window with a lattice that was on the verge of coming off had been within his field of view. Maybe through here he could get up onto the roof. Once he got outside, he could grab onto the thorn shrubs and use them as a ladder to climb down. It would be murder on his already-injured body, but it was far better than just sitting there.

Takuma started to climb up the staircase. His body felt heavy, like it was made of lead. Whenever he put a bit of strength into climbing the stairs, heat would burst from his injuries and he wouldn't be able to breathe. As he looked up, he thought the words, 'Keep going up... Keep going up...' to himself to keep himself from losing conscious. In order to make it out of this cage of thorns, he continued to climb the dizzying spiral staircase.

---4---

10 months had passed since she had been pushed down between the buildings. Except for a short 10 minute period around noon when the sun shone down, it was always dim and gloomy, but the bitter cold of the night had diminished quite a bit.

She spent all her time thinking about the child. She was sure she would never get out herself now. But she didn't mind. As long as the child in her belly was born without any complications and she made sure it was being taken care of at a safe place, she didn't need to go outside anymore.

If she had one regret, it was her mother and father. Not a day went by that she didn't think about how she would die without ever getting to talk to them again.

The child in her belly squirmed all around. It could be born any time now. When she thought about how this life had been with her the entire time, an odd feeling came over her.

When she was first pushed off the roof, she was beside herself with loneliness. Whenever she thought about how despite the great number of people walking by, she couldn't get any of them to realize she was there, she felt intensely lonely. But now, day or night, she never felt lonely. In fact, she could say that she was the least lonely person in the world.

There was a feeling like her belly was being pushed out from the other side. She knew whenever it went this way or that. Every time it moved, her belly swelled and changed shape. When she touched it with her hand, her belly felt hard from how stretched it was. It was so heavy it felt like lead had been attached to her waist.

Pain woke her up. Looking closely at her blanket, there were signs she was had been bleeding. According to the books that had been thrown down from the roof, and everything she had memorized everything about giving birth, this was an indication that the mouth of her uterus had opened. She put the teapot on the gas stove to heat the water inside it.

It seems it was the start of office hours. She could hear traffic out in the street. It was the sound of Morioh's economy going on the rise. People were entering buildings to start their work. It would continue tomorrow the day after tomorrow, every single morning.

A few hours later after a lull, suddenly a pain rose up in her so bad she couldn't breathe. It was a pain like her tailbone being pressed with an iron rod. Before giving birth, the uterus contracts over and over again. Her whole body broke out in sweat and she couldn't keep still. Yet at the same time, she couldn't walk around. After a little while, the pain went away. And she went back to a state so normal that it felt like everything she had just felt had all been her imagination.

One hour later, the pain like her body was being crushed came back with a vengeance. Nobody was around. Even Oogami Teruhiko and Orikasa Hanae would only come at night. Great danger would accompany giving birth on her own. There was a possibility that the umbilical cord could wrap around the child's neck and kill it. She could also have massive bleeding and die herself. If the situation became more than she could handle, her only choice would be to give up.

She wanted to ask her mother for help. If her mother were here, all her anxiety would drift away. Her mom would probably say something like, 'Don't worry, I've got my own experience with this,' and hold her hand.

The labor pains came in waves. At first, the pain came rushing back in one-hour intervals. Depending on the wave, it might get shorter, or it the pain might get more intense. She knew the child in her belly was going wild. It was going this way and that on the inside of her belly.

While putting up with the pain, she covered her body in mud. The walls on both sides of her towered up above her head, cutting off the blue sky. Her vision was warped by tears, so the walls looked like they were going to fall on top of her.

At first, she thought there couldn't be any pain worse than what she was feeling right now. But there was more to come. Waves of pain started gradually rising from her hips and abdomen. Even if it was just a little, she needed to keep breathing. But even that was difficult. After the waves of pain reached their peak, they abated again. And that repeated so long it felt like it lasted forever.

The anguish had such a hold over her body that she even forgot about wiping her tears. In the gaps between waves of pain, her consciousness was hazy. She could've fallen asleep or fainted at some point and she wouldn't have realized it. As soon as she might've been having a short dream, a new wave of pain came and woke her up.

The line between dreams and reality became hazy. She didn't know who she was or where she was anymore. The interval between waves of pain was down to 10 minutes, and not long after that it went down to 5 minutes. Her name, her past, her human thoughts were all torn away from her. All that was left was the will to give birth. Her body existed only for that purpose. She took oxygen into her lungs and she endured the pain that felt like her body was splitting in two.

When noon arrived, light shone down between the buildings. She rolled her clothes up, and her taut, hard stretched belly ready to burst was exposed to the sun's rays and it made the sweat running down her body sparkle.

She wondered if the child in her belly could see this light. Even if its eyes couldn't see, she wondered if it could sense a vague redness of the sun through her skin. She wanted to teach the child in her belly. She wanted to teach it that in the places it was going to soon, that light always shone.

---5---

'Up... Up...'

Takuma called out subconsciously as he ascended the spiral staircase. Before he knew it, he found himself at the top floor. He looked down over the handrail and fully realized that his body was now closer to the sky than it was before. There was no sign of anyone in the hallway; the lights weren't even on. He opened the door to one of the many rooms, one he and Chiho had entered together long ago. Just like he had seen before, this place had an eagle stuffed animal covered in spider webs and a globe whose colors had faded sitting on the ground. There was a thin layer of dust on the floor and the ceiling as well as the walls facing outside were at an angle.

The windows were set up in a shape where they were sticking out partway down a slanted roof. It was the kind of window that you slid up to open. It was covered in rust so opening it was pretty hard, but with one big shove he opened it up the whole way at once and the cold air from outside rushed into the room. The lattice on the window was nearly off, just as it had seemed to him before. By grabbing onto it and shaking it, the rusted bolts broke and he was able to take it off without much effort. As he put his foot on the windowsill and walked out onto the roof of the Thorn Building, he realized he'd let go of his bag and had lost it somewhere along the line. He decided not to go back to pick it up. Chiho's novel was inside the bag. He still hadn't read it all the way through, but he wouldn't be able to see her again to tell her what he thought of it anyway.

If he read it in The Book, he could see the details about the emotions he held towards Chiho written in it. It reminded him of looking in a mirror. The records in The Book were always free of falsehood. When he was with Chiho, every kind of feeling was swirling around inside him. The hatred he had towards his family. All the negative emotions he had, cursing that man's bloodline. But along with that was the affection he had for his sister with whom he shared blood. They both existed as a contradiction in his heart. He held about every human emotion for his sister that you could find in every dictionary in the world. But unfortunately, among them there wasn't a fragment of the one emotion she wanted most of all. Just one emotion; an emotion the world was overflowing with. It was because of that emotion that books lined shelves in bookstores and people sung songs of it. In the end, he could not hold that emotion that sounded ridiculous when put into words towards Chiho. No matter how much she wished for it, that emotion his heart could not produce that emotion. Still, he continued to perform as though he had it to the very end, all the while holding back guilt and nausea.

Takuma stood on top of the roof and the chill wind enveloped him. The steeply inclined roof unique to Western-style buildings had around 10 bay windows sticking out of it and Takuma had come out onto one of those. A little snow remained on the roof, not having fallen off from the steep incline.

The lights coming out from the windows in the residential district like stardust had been sprinkled under his eyes. Far off in the east it was pitch black where he knew the

sea to be. To the northwest he could see the train station and the roundabout plaza. With that place as the center, the roads extended out like the strands of a spider web lit by street lights.

He could see a faint light in the corner of his vision. Holding his breath, he gazed towards the smoke. He could see a red flame in one corner of the town straight north from the Thorn Building. The houses seemed like lots of little puzzle pieces put together and among them, just one spot sparkled. The houses and roads covered in snow in the area were red as if lit up by a sunset.

The flames of hell were enveloping the sinner. Father must have seen the necklace and realized who Takuma was, then there must've been some kind of exchange with him and his daughter. That light was the result. Maybe he lit the house on fire out of remorse. Takuma would probably hear about the details before too long. If Father was dead, then that might end up being a blessing for him.

He could hear the sound of the wind howling. His breath turned white in the cold air, slid up the roof, and dissolved into the Morioh air. The roof creaked behind him and he heard a voice he recognized.

'Senpai, that girl not with ya today? Ya know, the one you were with when I met ya that day by the train station.'

At a particularly high part of the center of the Thorn Building's roof, there was an octagonal dome. And around it, there were seven spires as well as ivy decorations made of iron. Some thick clouds had gathered in the sky making it dark out, but in the outdoor lights and the Thorn Building's flood lights, it wasn't hard to see.

Next to the octagonal dome at the high point on the roof stood a male student in a black school uniform. He looked like a delinquent in the same way Okuyasu did. His posture was beautiful. He was just standing there, his hands deep in his pockets, but he gave off an atmosphere of a sculpture carved by a great artist.

'Did you get in by breaking through the front entrance?'

Takuma wondered how he'd known he was up on the roof.

'I couldn't cure Okuyasu's symptoms. I called an ambulance, but I forgot ta ask for a second one. I think we're gonna need it. The first for Okuyasu and the second for you, Senpai.'

If there was one mistake he'd had made in his life, it was failing to kill this person. That's what went through Takuma's mind as he looked up at Higashikata Jousuke.

The clouds drifted above their heads. He felt like they were so close they could touch them if they reached out. The town where people were going about their daily lives extended out below their feet. Maybe it was because the buildings looked so small, but it looked like a model of a town rather than a real one. All the roads and the arrangements of trees and shrubs looked like a miniature garden somebody had designed. The roof of this library that housed an enormous number of books was close

to the heavens and a great distance from the ground. Barely anyone ever came here. The only frequent visitors were birds and the wind. They couldn't hear a single sound outside their own breathing.

Higashikata Jousuke took his hands out of his pockets and arranged part of his hair that had gotten disheveled. Using the balls of his fingers and the flat palms of his hands, he arranged it with such care that he would not allow a single hair to be out of place. The outdoor lights lit up his face from beneath, projecting a huge silhouette onto the wall behind him. He was about 20 meters away.

'School's out for vacation. But I'm gonna need you to hang out with me a little while longer, Senpai.'

It was in a tone like when a delinquent was calling someone out to fight them. But he wasn't raising his voice. He said those words with an assertive, firm will.

'Why do you feel the need to keep butting into my life?'

'You tried ta kill my old lady.'

'Only because you people interfered with me.'

'I dunno what your reasons are, but I've got more than enough reasons ta knock your lights out. So many reasons my pockets'll rip tryin' ta hold 'em all.'

The hems of his uniform flapped in the wind. With this much wind, any knife he threw wouldn't glide through the air that far and he only had the one black knife he'd picked up before stored in his uniform jacket anyway. It was his left shoulder that had broken bones in it, so he wouldn't have any problems throwing knives with his good right arm. Thanks to the outdoor lights, the area wasn't too dark. It wasn't so dark that he couldn't read the text in The Book. If he tried to run, Jousuke would probably chase him. So he would have to do something about him here.

'Speakin' 'a pockets, Senpai, you'd better be careful not ta tear yours anymore. I'm just sayin', when ya went at it with Okuyasu before, one 'a yours ripped, didn't it? Shouldn't be like that anymore, though.'

While keeping an eye on Jousuke, Takuma moved his hand to feel his right pocket. The fabric of his pocket that had been torn off from the seam due to The Hand's attack had been restored.

'That specialty trick of yours, huh...?'

Putting broken things back to the way they were, healing hurt bodies; that is the ability Jousuke's Stand possessed. That was Takuma's guess, drawn from numerous observations. Just like the time he'd fixed his fountain pen, this time he'd put his school uniform back to its original state, it seemed. But when did that happen? He didn't sense Jousuke anywhere near him.

'Crazy Diamond,' said Jousuke. Then out of nowhere, a man was standing behind him. He was right up against his back, and standing in the exact same pose, as if a copy of Jousuke himself. It was no less than his shadow, his guardian angel, and his soul itself. It was always quietly standing just beside Jousuke.

'This guy's gonna make your face look like a piece of avant-garde artwork.'

The Stand behind him took a stance like a boxer. Apparently, this thing's name was Crazy Diamond. It was dressed in an outfit reminiscent of a medieval knight. Its body appeared to shine like it was emitting light from the inside. The muscles in its arms and its neck had perfect symmetry and were smooth like a plaster bust. It had the same tin-robot expression that The Hand did, but this one was more human. It wasn't his first time seeing it. When Jousuke had healed his mother, Takuma had seen it from a short distance off in a tree through binoculars.



But Takuma had two questions:

- 1: how did his uniform pocket get restored in this situation?
- 2: how did he manage to do that without getting anywhere close to Takuma?

Based on what he observed from when Jousuke healed his mother, the stimulus of Crazy Diamond touching something with its fists seemed to trigger something akin to turning back time in order to restore something. Even up against a critical wound that

could lead to death, it could restore its target to the point where there wasn't even a scar left behind. But there was never a single moment where Crazy Diamond could've touched his jacket.

Maybe all he had to do was touch one of the pieces that had fallen off in order to heal whatever it was part of? He knew the shreds of his torn-off pocket fell on the floor on the first floor. There was plenty of time for that to have been touched by the Stand.

That body, as tense as a statue, moved fluidly through the air. Takuma carefully observed Crazy Diamond's fist movement. He still had no idea what sort of tactic Jousuke was going to pull, so Takuma decided to give him the first move. A distance of 20 meters. No matter what Jousuke did to him, he should have room to dodge.

Crazy Diamond gently struck the wall of the dome behind Jousuke. It didn't seem to put have put all that much power into it, but it let out the sound of an explosion along with clouds of dust, leaving the brick wall along with the thorny vines on it destroyed. This left huge scraps of rubble scattered on the ground and he heard a large amount of broken wall make a raucous clatter as it fell from the vaulted ceiling to the floor inside the Thorn Building.

Crazy Diamond picked up a piece of rubble the size of a human head up with one hand and with the form of a baseball pitcher, he hurled it at Takuma. The action had no useless movements; it even had the elegance of a dance move.

The moment after Crazy Diamond released the rubble, a hole formed right at Takuma's feet. It made a sound like a cannon firing and the impact made it feel like a wave had just rippled across the roof.

Takuma was sure it had just flown across the sky in a straight line, but his eyes could barely catch its trajectory at all. The way he so casually tossed that massive rock made it seem like he wasn't using even half his full power.

Jousuke grunted and nodded his head. Running away would be too dangerous. It was sheer luck that that first shot hadn't hit him and he had a feeling that once Jousuke reassessed the angle and distance a bit, the next one wouldn't miss. Crazy Diamond picked up another huge piece of rubble.

Takuma immediately slid on the steep roof. Judging from the vibrations he felt, a second hole had just formed right where he'd just been standing. If he slowly tried to escape on his broken leg, he would probably end up very badly injured.

The thorny vines extended up to the roof. Heading towards them, he reached out his hand and put on the brakes. The many thorns dug into his palms and blood spurted out. Unable to bear his weight, thorn vines snapped. But just before he was flung from the edge of the roof into the air, he just managed to halt his momentum. Rearranging his posture, he managed to crawl into the shadow of a nearby spire to hide.

The seven spires on the roof were massive square pillars around three meters in width. They were all made of red brick and covered with sharp thorny vines. Their tops converged into a sharp pyramid shape, making the Thorn Building look like a pincushion

from far away. The spire Takuma hid behind was located at the northernmost edge of the roof; any further and you were off the edge of it. Just past where Takuma was standing, there was nothing but a sheer drop to the ground. He couldn't run any farther. All he could do now was use the spire as a shield to stay out of Jousuke's line of sight.

'A guy could freeze to death on a cold night like tonight,' he heard Jousuke's voice say. Even though he couldn't see him, Takuma could tell where he was based on the direction of his voice. It seemed like he hadn't moved at all from next to the octagonal dome at the center of the roof.

'Tryin' ta hide? Sorry ta break it to ya, but I can see your breath turning white and drifting out from behind there. The moment you poke your head out, I'm gonna break your skull open and paint this roof with your brains.'

Takuma looked at the palm of his own hand. Thanks to the thorns from the vines, it was now cut full of holes. He focused his mind on The Book, and the dark brown book rose up from his bloody palm. There were scrapes and bend marks all over the cover. The Book was becoming beat up, mirroring his body. That moment reappeared in his head and he analyzed what had just passed through his vision. Its supple movements, the speed with which it swung its arm. Judging from the size of the piece of wall it threw, he surmised its weight. Then he calculated the power needed to shoot it like a cannonball. If he got hit seriously by that fist, he could tell his face would end up not shaped the same way it had been beforehand. If that cannonball from earlier had hit him, he wouldn't be alive right now. Even if he didn't die, he would at least be gravely injured. What he was up against now was completely unmanageable destructive power.

Takuma leaned against the spire wall and started talking to Jousuke while keeping himself hidden.

'Were you trying to demonstrate to me that your power is so overwhelming that you could kill me from far away without taking a



single step in my direction? I'm afraid it had a bit of a different effect. You just exposed part the nature of Crazy Diamond to me. Namely, that it can't travel all that far away from you.'

Crazy Diamond had never left Jousuke's side when it attacked, which was a likely indication that it was actually unable to drift far from Jousuke's body. Just like The Hand, it traded range in exchange for incredible power. Meaning the only option Jousuke had was to break apart the wall and throw it at him.

'...It's quite bizarre, though. Destruction and regeneration? It must be quite an unsteady balance, possessing both. Is it because of your personality? Maybe your spirit has a bit of a divide to it? I've heard some rumors. You're normally a pretty gentle guy, but when something pisses you off, you do a real 180.'

He had one advantage. He was gradually getting a grasp of Crazy Diamond's abilities, but Jousuke couldn't say the same for his abilities. He may know about his ability to plant memories in other people, but he shouldn't know about how The Book activated by entering into someone's vision. There'd been a reason Okuyasu was able to guess that you had to be able to see it back in that fight. It was because of the way that Takuma had chosen to retreat, rather than attack, when he was in the smokescreen caused by the fire extinguisher. Jousuke didn't know that, so he wouldn't close his eyes as a defense. This meant that Takuma should be able to end the fight with his first move.

When he placed his hand on the leather cover of The Book, he felt a slight warmth.

He never let anyone into his heart. No matter what his true feelings, he never cried. But he never felt lonely. He had this book. It was always with him, like it was watching over him. He didn't complain. He wouldn't even let himself think about complaining. He refused to leave any pathetic descriptions like that in this book.

The sound of the roof creaking signaled to him that Jousuke was on the move. It seemed he was now approaching the spot where Takuma was hiding. With the square corners of the spire walls blocking them, they couldn't see each other, but Jousuke had a firm grasp on where Takuma was. His breath turned white in the air, completely giving himself away. Even knowing that, Takuma remained hidden behind the corner of the spire. He couldn't afford to miss Jousuke's footsteps and breathing. Whether he was going to throw the knife or thrust The Book at him, Takuma first had to get a precise idea of his distance from him.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of something breaking right next to his head. The broken bits of brick scattered everywhere, and the spire's corner was scraped away. It looked like Crazy Diamond had thrown a piece of wall right around where Takuma was

hiding. That huge piece of rubble, heavy enough to be hard for a normal human to lift, not only broke away the corner, but also went straight through it and disappeared into the empty sky. It would keep traveling a number of kilometers before landing in a field devoid of people, leaving a huge crater.

'You think ya can just hide? I toldja, I know yer there.'

Jousuke's voice sounded closer than it had before.

A large amount of snow had slid off the steep slope of the roof, but there was still a little snow caught between the spires and the roof. Takuma gathered a bunch of it in his hands and crammed it into his mouth. If that rubble that was just thrown at him had hit its target, he wouldn't have a head right now. One false move could mean his life. If he made a wrong judgement or his timing was off, he wasn't going to get a second chance. He wouldn't even have time to regret his mistake. Focusing every nerve in his body, he sensed the approaching threat.

Because of the snow he had crammed in it, the inside of his mouth had cooled down, and his tongue wouldn't move the way he wanted it to. He couldn't talk anymore. He wouldn't let Jousuke know about what actions he was taking. This nervousness he had from confronting Jousuke would disappear in a few seconds, too. Everything would be over, and come tomorrow, he could go wherever he wanted. His days of hating someone day in and day out would finally end.

Jousuke's footsteps came to a halt. He was now just a few steps away from Takuma. The white breath Jousuke exhaled drifted through the air and passed right in front of Takuma's eyes, close enough that he could touch it if he reached his hand out. If he turned around the corner of the spire, Jousuke would be right there. There was no doubt in his mind that he was within The Book's effective range.

There was no sign of Jousuke attacking. He was bewildered. He stopped moving carelessly and looked around. He was forced to observe now. Jousuke was waiting for the moment Takuma let out white breath. He'd been using that white breath as a signpost for where to move. But now his signpost was gone.

The reason breath becomes visible and white during the winter is due to the big difference in temperature between the inside of a human's body and the outside air temperature. It turns white because the moisture in the breath cool and become bits of ice. In order to prevent that phenomenon, you just need to fill your mouth with snow. By cooling the inside of your mouth, that will reduce the difference between the breath you exhale and the outside air to almost nothing, so the ice bits won't form. As a result, your breath won't be visible.

Now that Jousuke had lost track of Takuma's exhalations, he stopped in place and his gaze sped all around the area. Doubt that the enemy was behind the spire had arisen in his mind. If there was a chance of victory, it was this moment.

Takuma stepped out from behind the spire. Just as he'd predicted, Jousuke was standing their right around the corner. They were under 2 meters apart and Crazy

Diamond was at Jousuke's side. He was looking in another direction, but sensing Takuma's presence, Jousuke turned to face him. He had a reaction time far faster than that of a normal person, but Takuma was one move faster.

The Book's pages flipped at high speed. In the next moment, he called out the description of when he was in a traffic accident. It was the most destructive page in his forbidden sections. All it had to do was pass into your vision for a moment and you would lose consciousness. It wouldn't matter how honed your body was.

Jousuke made Crazy Diamond take a fighting posture. At the same time, Takuma held The Book out right in front of Jousuke's nose.

The direction of the wind changed. Jousuke closed his eyelids.

He already knew the conditions for activating The Book. He'd already got a hold of the information on how he had to see it, apparently. The Book's attack would not work.

Instantly his mind switched gears. This was exactly how it had gone with Okuyasu. Takuma immediately stepped back.

Crazy Diamond carried out its attack. In the blink of an eye, a fist was thrust forward right in front of his eyes twice. He could feel the air pressure on his face. Jousuke was attacking with his eyes closed. He didn't have a fixed target. But if Takuma hadn't drawn back, one of those fists would hit him head-on, giving him a fatal wound.

He took his throwing knife from out of his jacket. It was his last one, but now was the time to use it. The major difference between this time and his fight with Okuyasu was now, he had this knife. With Jousuke's eyes closed, he shouldn't have any idea the knife would be heading straight for him. And with the distance between them this small, Takuma wouldn't miss. Takuma could normally make the throwing knife spin one full rotation every 3.5 meters. Just at the point that was the exact distance between him and Jousuke, he would throw it. Right as he was about to let go of the knife, targeting Jousuke's heart, he felt an impact on his back.

He couldn't breathe and several bones in his body fractured.

His aim went astray. It cut a red line on Jousuke's cheek and the knife disappeared into the open air.

He leaned against the spire wall and forced himself not to collapse. The fist-sized piece of rubble that had slammed into his back fell off the roof and made a heavy sound out of sight. He didn't know what had caused it immediately. That piece of rubble had come flying at him from the opposite direction of Jousuke and hit Takuma in the back.

'Everybody sometimes feels like there's a time in their past they'd like to go back to, right? I think maybe even walls, vases, and things like that do, too.'

Takuma heard Jousuke's words coming mainly from over his head. This was because of their difference in height and because Takuma had fallen to his knees.

'Crazy Diamond has already restored *that thing*. They always take the shortest route, so if you were standing at the corner of the spire, that meant there was no way in hell it wouldn't hit you.'

Takuma coughed. There was blood among the saliva that went flying all over.

The misshapen clump of rubble had disappeared from the ground near his feet while he wasn't looking. No one had touched it. But it hadn't rolled off the angled roof, either.

Far off, he could hear a *ka-tuck* sound. The wall of the octagonal dome that Crazy Diamond had destroyed still had a huge hole in it. The sound he heard was of that hunk of rubble resettling itself perfectly in the rim of the hole. The rubble became a piece of the building once again, disappearing into it without even leaving a crack.

Why had Jousuke repaired Takuma's school uniform?

As Takuma had guessed, Jousuke's Stand certainly could repair things as long as he touched a broken fragment of it. Jousuke must have picked up a piece of torn-off cloth on the first floor and touched it with Crazy Diamond's hand. It then immediately began to "regenerate". Just as the piece of the wall that had been thrown far away went in a straight line back to the hole where it settled into place, the black fabric had sought out Takuma's jacket seam. It had singled out the torn edge up on the roof, made its way there, and completed reattaching itself to the seam of his jacket without him noticing.

It was no coincidence that Jousuke had found Takuma trying to flee the Thorn Building. He had followed the piece of his jacket here. He must've healed Takuma's jacket in order to figure out where he was.

But there was one thing Takuma still didn't understand. Why did he close his eyes? He tried to think of an explanation, but the impact he had taken to his back made it hard to think. Perhaps because of how rattled his insides were, he felt like throwing up.

Jousuke stood before Takuma's eyes and wiped the blood off his cheek. He was close enough that Takuma could've touched him if he'd stretched his arm out. Even after the last exchange had taken place, Jousuke did not retreat at all, and remained within The Book's effective range. But at the same time, Takuma was within Crazy Diamond's range.

Jousuke clearly had confidence in the speed of Crazy Diamond's fists. He must've been certain that if Takuma had tried to hold the book out now, Jousuke would have reacted immediately and driven that fist into Takuma before he could do it.

'You're makin' a face like you don't know why I've got my eyes closed right now, right?'

It was a low voice, like he was trying to hold back rage.

'I found Okuyasu collapsed on the first floor. And he seemed ta be tryin' ta tell me, "Don't look." He freakin' crushed both his eyes with his fingers. Two fingers were

lodged straight into his sockets. That idiot. He really trusted that I'd come to that spot and that I'd heal his eyes. Senpai, I'm freakin' amazed how much of an idiot that guy is.'

When Okuyasu had covered his face and stopped moving, Takuma should have approached him and checked his face.

'So when you tried to hold your book out to me, it hit me. That book's your Stand, right? Ya didn't have it before.'

Jousuke glanced at the leather-bound book Takuma had in his right hand. The cover and edges of The Book were more beat up than they had been before.

'So you attack by showing your opponents your book? And it's gotta be from a short distance away. If you could attack me from far away, then you sure as hell would've done it by now. Hey, don't move. I can turn your face into a gag manga character before you can even *open* that book.'

'One can only be so over-confident.'

Because of the saliva mixed with blood in his throat, he couldn't speak without coughing.

'I can turn my pages faster than that surly man can thrust his fists out.'

He glanced at Crazy Diamond, standing next to Jousuke. Its face was close to that of a human's, but it was expressionless. It barely seemed to have any emotions at all. It was completely still, like a statue. Only its eyes were turned towards Takuma. And then, Jousuke spoke as if to challenge Takuma.

'Let's go, then! Which is faster, my fists or you holding out your book?'

'Aren't you going to heal that cut on your cheek?'

Blood continued to drip from Jousuke's cheek. He did not answer Takuma's question. Maybe that meant that Crazy Diamond couldn't heal the injuries of Jousuke himself? If that was true, then that would be quite welcome news. That meant Takuma wouldn't have to end their fight in one shot. Damage would gradually build up on Jousuke's body. Any broken bones or ruptured organs would not be turned back to normal.

Throwing his final knife had not been in vain. There was value in just getting this much information. That made him feel very slightly better. Knowing that Jousuke's Stand was not invincible was vitally important.

'Also, it looks like you can heal injuries, but not illnesses, huh? You said you couldn't cure Okuyasu's symptoms before. What about life and death? Are you able to bring a dead person back to life, or no?'

As he expected, Jousuke stayed silent. Standing next to him in the same position was Crazy Diamond, immaculate with its polished armor and not a single hair or speck of dirt on its skin. He wasn't hallucinating; this thing was actually standing there, giving off a real sense of mass. However, there was an exception: one cut in its cheek. It was injured in the same place Jousuke himself was. They had the same relationship he had with The Book in that any injury Jousuke suffered, Crazy Diamond would as well.

He couldn't hear sirens anymore, but the fire in the distance hadn't yet died out. The house where his father and sister lived would probably be reduced to ash by morning. The seven spires on the roof of the Thorn Building let out a high-pitched sound from the wind cutting across them. The snow that hadn't slid off of the roof broke apart and fluttered off the edge of the roof.

He gathered his thoughts on what he should be doing next. Crazy Diamond was enormously powerful. He knew that wasn't an opponent he could afford to get hit by head-on. But the path to victory was not completely blocked. Even if you have a car with tons of horsepower, you still need a human to drive it. And if the mind of that driver wavers, one could take advantage of that opening and overtake it with another car.

'There's something I've been meaning to ask you. And if I let this moment slip by, I might not get another chance,' said Takuma to Jousuke.

'Well, ya see, I wanted to ask about that hair style of yours...'

In *One Thousand and One Nights*, there's a girl that tells a story to a king every night in order to avoid being executed. In the end, the King gains open-mindedness and moral values. As the story goes, the execution gets called off, the king marries the girl, and they have children. In that story, someone makes use of their own character to cause others to grow. There was something he had to do before a counter-attack on Higashikata Jousuke, and that was tell a story. Just like in *One Thousand and One Nights*, he would have to risk his life on a story.

Takuma developed an idea for a story in his head. And he already settled on an ending.

"By means of the book, Jousuke will die."

All he had to do was tell the story that would lead to that ending.

If he tried to hold The Book out now, the humanoid Stand's fist would thrust out the moment Jousuke sensed it. He was in an unusual situation right now, being in mid-combat. The distance between the two of them was less than two meters. It was the equivalent of each of them having a gun to each other's head, and he had no intention of seeing if he could flip pages in his book faster than Crazy Diamond could punch. In this situation, there weren't going to be any moments where someone was going to leave themselves open. But if he wanted to survive, he was going to have to manufacture one. And for that, he would need to tell a story. In this fleeting moment of time, it would be best for him if he made the first move. If he could just manage to do that, his chances of killing Jousuke would skyrocket.

'What about my hair?'

Jousuke's face tensed. Crazy Diamond's hand curled into a fist. Just like the rumors had said, it looked like his hairstyle was sacred ground to Jousuke. Insulting it was like insulting his way of life itself; everything he believed in. It was both the most optimal and most dangerous material for a story to grab hold of Jousuke's heart. Just one misstep, or the wicked king would perform his execution.

'I hate to go off on a ramble here, but I heard rumors about why you have that hair style. It was on a night during a blizzard when you were four years old, if I recall correctly. Just like tonight, the whole world had turned white.'

He had referenced Jousuke in *The Book* beforehand, so he had all this information in his head. That story was at the deepest part of Jousuke's heart and was a major episode that the entire character of "Higashikata Jousuke" hinged on.

As he crouched, pain ran through all the injured areas on his body. He made *The Book* in his right hand disappear and placed it on his fractured left shoulder. Looking Jousuke in the eye, Takuma continued.

'If it weren't for *him*, the car would've been stuck. And you would've died that night. Quite an enigmatic person, wouldn't you say...?'

It was a memory from when he was a child. It was been a snowy night, and Jousuke and his mother's car was slipping on the snow and couldn't move. Then there appeared a boy in a school uniform jacket which he put under the tires which allowed the car to move.

It wasn't the act of helping another human being that had moved him. What made this resonate with him was that the boy sacrificed what had clothed him to get the mother and son moving. To him, this act was as holy as a line from a sacred text.

Supposedly Jousuke's outlandish hairstyle was modeled after *him*, the one who had saved him on that night when he was a child. If you wanted to find the origins of the metaphorical parts that made up the character of Higashikata Jousuke, then look no further than this episode of his life.

'Do you think *he* is still living in this town somewhere?'

'Would ya just spit out whatever it is yer tryin' ta say, already?!'

He made a face like he couldn't quite grasp Takuma's true intention. That was a good sign. Asking questions meant he was listening. Jousuke was beginning to latch on to his story.

'My ability is named *The Book*, and I can do more than plant my memories in other people. Its true usage is something much simpler. What is written in this book is an autobiographical novel. Everything I've ever seen, heard, or thought can be found in its pages and I can search or browse it whenever I like. For example, I could tell a person I'd only just met "Hey, we passed by each other this year on this day at that hour at this minute at that second, didn't we? Though I don't expect you to remember that." This leather-bound book is my life itself. Everything that's entered my field of vision during my lifetime is recorded within it.'

Holding his left shoulder, Takuma continued. He slouched forward a bit, feigning that he couldn't bear the pain. Jousuke was tall. If he bent forward at this distance, his right hand should be hard to see from Jousuke's perspective.

'You were four years old when you met *him*, right? I was five at that time. I used to like to stare at the faces of passersby and the license plate numbers on cars back

then. Even now, I can recall the scenery from back then down to the exact details. The townscape, the color of the sky, the music playing in the streets back then... I remember them all. I even remember your mom taking four-year-old you shopping with her. In fact, you and I passed by each other in this town a bunch of times. Not that I knew who you were back then. If I search for your current face or your mother's face, I could tell you where it was we passed by each other quite easily.'

'And?'

Jousuke was glaring now in a threatening manner. Then Takuma said with conviction in his voice, 'I should have seen *him* when I was 5 years old. I have knowledge of pretty much every person in this town. The data from when I was too young is all incomplete, but this being when I was 5 years old, I'm sure I should have seen *him*.'

Back then, Takuma had been brought to universities frequently by adults from the orphanage to have his unlimited memory investigated. They had him do things like remember numbers with tons of digits and solve mazes. Before he went back to the orphanage, he always looked forward to them treating him to ice cream at the cafe in front of the train station.

'I know for a certainty that I memorized the faces of every high school student from back then.'

He would sit at the open terrace of the cafe while throngs of middle schoolers would pass by him. Whether they used the train or the bus or were just hanging out at the shops in front of the train station, the students always passed in front of the train station on their way home. He visited that cafe a dozen or so times. While staring at the people in school uniforms passing in front of him, the number of 'new faces' eventually dwindled down to zero. Later, he went looking for documents. He compared the number of students he'd memorized with the number of students that were currently attending the school and the numbers matched. Takuma could say for certain that he'd memorized the appearance of every single person that had attended the school that year.

If he read The Book's records, Takuma should be able to find *him*. Somebody with the same hair style as Higashikata Jousuke should be particularly easy to find. All it would have taken is for that person to just flash in the corner of his vision at any point and he should be able to tell that it was the man who saved Higashikata Jousuke's life.

Jousuke breathed in and breathed out.

'Senpai, 're you tryin' ta say that stuff about that person is written in that book 'a yours?'

'He should be. I'm certain of it.'

The reason Jousuke got unstable every time somebody made fun of his hair style was because it shook Jousuke's spiritual pillar that was *him*. Having never had a father in his life, it was easy to imagine what kind of role *he* occupied for Jousuke. To Jousuke,

he served as the foundational principals of the world inside his head. He was law, he was moral values. Jousuke imitating his look was just like how a child might imitate how their dad looks. Jousuke wouldn't just pass up the chance to learn information about *him*. The execution would be put on hold until he'd learned the full story. Looking Jousuke in the eye, Takuma continued.

'Though I found out about the existence of such a person while I was investigating you, I've yet to ever search for *him* in The Book. If you would allow me to do so, I wouldn't be against taking a look at my descriptions of 13 years ago. So, what do you say?'

If he narrowed it down just to people with Jousuke's hair style and school jacket, he could probably get the result in under 10 seconds. If Takuma found a description of *him*, the rest would be simple. Based on the time and place he found *him*, along with things like what he had on him, Takuma should be able to guess his identity. If he knew the person's precise facial features, then he could find the present-day person even if he'd changed his hair style.

'You've been looking for him all this time, haven't you? You might be able to find out something about *him* here and now. All I need to do is open up The Book.'

The lights meant to make the Thorn Building stand out in the night time were shining in their direction. There were beads of sweat appearing on Jousuke's face.

At times when he'd begun to get discouraged, he would look back to his childhood and remember that man. He must still be alive. It was somewhat ironic; both of them had both been chasing their fathers for so long. For Takuma, it was someone connected to him by blood, but also someone he had to destroy. For Jousuke, he didn't have any blood connection to the person, but he saw him as someone he looked up to.

'Yeah, I guess that's right. You just need to open up that book. But keep in mind if this turns out to be some sorta joke, you're dead as a doornail. I'd consider this a serious insult towards *him*.'

After cooling it down before, his mouth was now back to normal. Breath he exhaled turned white and scattered in the wind, down towards the countless lights below them. They were the lights of the windows on the houses that made up the town of Morioh. It looked like a mass of stars in a black night sea. It gave off the illusion that they were standing on top of a galaxy.

'I'll call out The Book now. Not to attack you, though. Just to look for this person that saved you. So please, don't make that taciturn man do anything.'

Takuma glanced at Crazy Diamond. Jousuke did not tell Takuma to stop. Takuma knew he had been given permission.

He took his right hand off his left shoulder and called out The Book. The leather-bound book rose from his hand like a surfacing submarine. At the same time, he gently grasped the fountain pen sticking out of his breast pocket with his middle finger and forefinger. He performed this sequence of actions with great caution as to not come off

as unnatural. Since Jousuke was so tall and Takuma was slouching forward, there was no way he could see the movements he had made with his right hand near his chest.

He showed the cover of The Book to Jousuke. He was wary of Takuma opening it. But unlike before, he was less inclined to just attack Takuma no-questions-asked the moment it opened. He was taking a stance of watching over Takuma's actions. Jousuke wanted to know about *him*.

He could have searched for *him* immediately. But Takuma had no intention of doing that from the start.

'By the way, I'd like to ask you your opinion on something first. Whether The Book ends up having a description of *him* or not...' Takuma asked, looking down at the book. It was time to fold up the story he had laid out.

'Are you makin' fun 'a me?'

The thread holding Jousuke's sense of reason together sounded like it was about to snap. When it came to his hair or to *him*, his boiling point was abnormally low. If Takuma mishandled this, that thread of reason would snap like it was nothing.

'Listen closely. Here's the important part of the story. If I search my past and I find *him*, then no problem. But if that's not the case... If I *can't* find him, what kind of situation do you think that would point to? I know pretty much all of the faces of the people that lived in Morioh at that time. That includes every last one of the middle and high schoolers. So I need you to accept that as a condition beforehand. If there's still no description of him in The Book, I'm not at fault. But that would be quite an odd situation. Because if there's no description of him in The Book, then that means a man that should not have been in Morioh appeared there, on only that night, in front of you and your mother.'

'That ain't too likely.'

'Your mother looked for *him* to try to thank him, right? But she ultimately wasn't able to find him. Don't you think that's bizarre? Why would she have so much trouble finding somebody with such a conspicuous hair style...?'

Their breathing had become heavy. The tiny white particles passed by their vision. Every time they exhaled, those tiny ice particles would swirl in the air. Accompanying the pain of the injuries, sweat dripped down their faces.

'This is something I highly doubt anyone else can answer. The solution to that question that may otherwise go forever unsolved is written here in this book. I'll investigate *him* for you here and now. But tell me, has it ever even crossed your mind? The possibility that *he* never actually existed at all?'

Jousuke's fists gradually clenched tighter. There wasn't an ounce of mercy in those eyes; they were more like the eyes of a criminal. It was a subject he was fine with thinking about, but one he was never able to say aloud.

'What makes ya think that?'

'Your mother must've asked the school, right? About whether there was a student there with a hairstyle like that or not? If she still couldn't find him, then it's only natural that the idea "he never existed at all" might cross your mind, wouldn't you say? And *he* was covered with injuries like he'd just gotten out of a fight? You must've wondered what somebody like that was doing on a country road in the middle of the night during a blizzard like that, right? Kinda convenient, don't you think? Almost like foreshadowing they might stick in a time-travel sci-fi story? So from that I came up with a hypothesis of *his* identity.'

He could guess Jousuke's mental state from his breathing. The sound he made as he inhaled. The up-and-down movements of his chest. The air being blown out from between his lips. Its rhythm was even more disorderly than it had been earlier. But he kept his fists clenched. He stood stock still, like he'd stepped on a landmine. The moment he felt intimidated and moved his feet, there was sure to be an explosion.

'Now, this is purely a guess...'

He had to do it. To stop the explosion, he had to step on the landmine so hard it was driven deep into the ground.

'Maybe *he* was actually *you*?'

The slanted roof of the Thorn Building creaked, probably because of the subtle change in Jousuke's center of gravity. Jousuke made a face like he wanted to say, 'What the hell did he mean by that?' His clenched fists relaxed a bit. Some of the tension from the thread of reason that was about to snap was removed, and it slackened all at once. His muscles had relaxed. It hadn't happened spontaneously. It was something brought about in Jousuke by the force of Takuma's will.

Right now, if Takuma thrust out The Book, the battle would be over. No, even if his muscles were relaxed, his closing his eyes would be faster. If Takuma wanted to win, he would have to show the book to Jousuke with his eyes open without taking an attack from Crazy Diamond. And for that, a few things needed to be in place.

Without any preparatory movements, Takuma threw the fountain pen. Having lost its support, the leather-bound book dropped through the air.

In this situation, a normal human who could not use a Stand would have seen the fountain pen hidden in his right hand long ago. But because Jousuke could see Stands, anything hidden behind it was not in his line of sight. He had been holding the fountain pen between the back cover of the book and the fingers of his right hand. As long as the cover was facing Jousuke, he wouldn't be able to see the pen. Because he could see Stands, The Book would always block his view, preventing him from seeing what was behind it.

"By means of the book, Jousuke will die."

Just a little more and he would finish telling the story.

If Jousuke had gone on his guard the moment he sensed Takuma moving, he would've walloped him with Crazy Diamond. The fountain pen flew at his face.

Takuma's aim was accurate. This time, the distance to his target and the number of rotations didn't matter. His goal was not for it to stab anything.

The writing implement was just a few centimeters from Jousuke's nose when it was slapped out of the air by Crazy Diamond's hand. His Stand's reaction time was astounding. The shell of the fountain pen, unable to withstand the impact, cracked and shattered to pieces in mid-air. The ink from inside the pen burst out like an explosion right in front of Jousuke's face. He immediately closed his eyes and turned his head at an angle to keep the ink spray from getting in his eyes.

Takuma trusted that he would shield his eyes. If ink had gotten in them, he wouldn't be able to activate The Book's ability anymore. The very fact that he was able that was a testament to his outstanding combat skills. In the type of story Takuma was creating, Jousuke would make a certain move. He would protect his eyes from the ink, and that would be his cause of defeat.

Whenever someone protects their eyes, the next thing they do, without fail, is open them. They look around to see if they successfully protected their eyes. It was a natural human reflex action.

As The Book dropped through the air, the cover opened. All he had to do was will it. The pages of the records of his life flipped one after another. All he needed was for the memory of the car accident he was in to enter the corner of Jousuke's vision, and the winner would be decided. Takuma caught The Book in mid-air.

The scenery reflected in his eyes, the sound his ears heard; all were turned into paragraphs and appeared in lines on the surface of the pages. The pages always opened in the order from the present to the past. Like a human reminiscing about his past, the pages turned from yesterday to the day before yesterday to a week ago, to a month ago, to a year ago, to a decade ago. It wasn't at a speed at which you could decipher the characters, but he had a vague understanding of what was on them.

The memories of him making small talk with classmates and memories of spending time in the library with Futaba Chiho appeared and disappeared behind other pages in an instant. Those memories turned into the memories of when he was staking out his father's house to ones where he was living at the orphanage. The next moment, it was past all those pages and buried in a mountain of other memories.

The fragments of his fountain pen continued falling through the air, now halfway down their bodies. The blue ink splash had formed countless small globules which crossed with the bits of ice.

With his eyes closed, Jousuke shifted to attacking. He put every muscle in Crazy Diamond's body into full operation. Its body seemed to suddenly swell up all at once. The muscles on its back bulged out, looking like fruits ready to burst to Takuma, and its stone fist thrust out like it was bursting out of it at an unbelievable speed.

Every time a page of The Book flipped, Crazy Diamond's fist came closer and got bigger. It looked like even with his eyes closed, he still knew Takuma's approximate location, and at the end of the line that fist was moving on was Takuma's face.

It was at age 8 that Takuma was involved in the traffic accident. It took time to reach that page. It would take no time at all for it to go from the present to five minutes ago or yesterday, but the further back in time the memory was, the more pages it had to flip through. In a normal human interaction, it was the kind of span of time someone would describe as "in no time." But up against Crazy Diamond, it was a very different story. He didn't look on it lightly. He had plenty of respect for that ability. But the speed at which that fist was heading for him was greater than he'd predicted.

While pushing the dancing ink particles and pen fragments out of the way, the fist approached him. He compared the speed of the fist with the speed of the page flips. Somehow, it looked like the fist would arrive before the pages with the car accident opened.

Past the extending arm was Jousuke's face with cheeks covered in ink. He was trying to open his eyes, but only a slight squint. If the pages turned all the way to the traffic accident, he could have beaten up Jousuke. Or if he possessed the physical ability to avoid the fist, he could've thrust the book out to end it. But Crazy Diamond's speed was not the sort of thing he could adapt to with his personal reflexes.

Takuma readied himself. He was ready to change the story he'd from what he'd first written in his head.

Jousuke's eyelids opened and his eyeballs made contact with the outside air. At that moment, the sound of his ribs snapping rang out. A huge number of cuts ran across Jousuke's face and neck and as a sound like sticks being trampled under someone's foot, his fist warped in shape. Takuma knew precisely what kind of injury had been just been dealt to Jousuke body. All at once, three ribs, two finger bones, and knee ligaments all had severe injuries.

That impact extended to Crazy Diamond as well. His body was injured and warped in the same places Jousuke had. Crazy Diamond's fist shook as it approached Takuma.

Before the attack hit Takuma, The Book had entered into Jousuke's vision. It wasn't the page with the traffic accident. The page that it had gotten to before the fist had arrived was a different one of the forbidden sections.

There had been two times in Takuma's past when he had attempted suicide. The first time was when he'd stabbed his arms with scissors and the second time was when he'd jumped out the window of a hospital. The memory that had been implanted in Jousuke was the one from when he was 10 years old and jumped out the window of his hospital room and plunged into the shrubbery. By seeing that memory, Takuma had "empathized" his own experience into Jousuke's soul, deluding his body into suffering the same injuries.

It wasn't as lethal as the traffic accident. He wouldn't lose consciousness from it, either. But now, what was vital was to not get hit by Crazy Diamond's attack. The impact of the injury would probably halt Jousuke's hands. It was the sort of injury that a normal human would double over in pain from and would not even be able to breathe after. And he could not heal injuries to his own body, either. If he wasn't hit by Crazy Diamond's attack, it would be easy for him to deal the finishing blow to a slowed Jousuke.

But there was something he had miscalculated; Higashikata Jousuke's will. He had real determination. Determination to follow through with that fist no matter what happened to him.

The injury it had suffered caused Crazy Diamond's fist to shatter and warp from the inside. But Jousuke did not stop his attack. And when Takuma realized that, Crazy Diamond's fist was already right in front of his eyes.

A shockwave assaulted Takuma's cheek. Even though the momentum had been reduced somewhat by the injury, that fist was heavy as a clump of stone. The bones in his face were smashed, and it felt to him like his neck was going to snap. His head received a heavy jolt and he lost consciousness for a moment. Takuma was blown back and slammed into the wall of a spire as if a small explosion had occurred right where his face had been. Crazy Diamond's right arm had finally fully extended; the fist had seen its swing through to the end.

'...I don't care either way.'

He had awful ringing in his ears like a jet plane had just brushed against them. Still, he could hear Jousuke's voice loud and clear. In the corner of his vision, he could see Jousuke on his knees on the slanted roof. A large volume of blood was oozing out of the nape of his neck. Wincing from the pain, he continued speaking between breaths.

'Whether that person really existed or not... Even if I knew, it wouldn't make any difference to me.'

Red mucus dripped out of Takuma's nose like lava. At first, he couldn't feel anything because of the numbness, but as time passed the pain in the left side of his face gradually became more noticeable.

'Senpai, no matter what you say ta me, the way I live my life ain't gonna change. 'Cause I still ain't ever found anythin' cooler than this hairstyle.'

Jousuke's eyes were blank, like he was about to lose consciousness. Two of his fingers on his right hand were bent at an odd angle. Jousuke slowly lifted his arm and supported up his head with his hand. Just as Takuma was wondering what he was going to do, Jousuke started to conscientiously put his hair that had gotten messed up back in shape. Even though he was bleeding, his hair was the first thing he cared about.

Takuma's teeth fell onto the roof along with bloody saliva and they both slid down its slope. Touching his face, he was amazed it was still in its original shape. He tried to grab onto the wall of a spire and get back on his feet, but as he was having a hard time telling up from down and he felt like he was going to fall, he wasn't able to hold on.

He could hear a flapping sound like the wings of a bird. It was the sound of a great number of pages of The Book flying up into a gust of wind. The leather-bound book had fallen right next to him. It seemed that a bunch of his memories had been blown away from the impact. The fallen pages were carried by the wind into the sky of the town. It was a scene like a flock of birds whirling through the air.

---6---

Lukewarm water flooded all over. The liquid wet her thighs and was soaked into the mud. The membrane covering the baby had broken, and the amniotic fluid was being squeezed out. This was a change in her body she'd never experienced before. This was a precious sensation, a sensation some people never experienced in an entire lifetime.

The state of the pain changed. When the baby pushed its head through the membrane, it became a direct, sharp pain. The child had left its usual place and was trying to come out. In order to send him outside, she put all her might into her abdominal muscles and pushed.

The intervals between the pain disappeared; it simply remained in her body. There was a power in her body outside her control. Even though it was scary, it wasn't something that could be kept waiting, just like you can't ask gravity to wait to make you fall. All humans could do against that providence was obey. She felt a will to release a child from her body. She pushed in sync with the coming waves. The tears never stopped.

The narrow strip of sky was blue. Quite a clear day today, she thought.

The cry echoed between the walls.

It was a baby boy.

---7---

'I went to collect my mother's body...'

He wanted to put it into words before the memory was carried off by the wind and disappeared.

'One evening, I went up onto the roof, and looked down into the gap between the buildings...'

It was when he was twelve years old. He'd been thinking about it for some time, but it wasn't until that age when he was able to summon enough courage to set foot at that place. It was somewhat of a guess, but when he saw what was up there, he knew. He crossed over the fall-prevention wire mesh and stood at the edge of the roof. The concrete walls, exposed to the elements, had lots of stains on it. Between the two flat walls, down at the bottom, it was dark. His legs shook. It really was not the kind of place in which a human could live. It was cold and dark; a place abandoned by God.

He'd let down a rope, but he hadn't worked up the nerve to climb down it. Just before dawn, he finally started to descend into the gap between the buildings. The closer he got the bottom, the more humid the air became. It smelled like raw meat. The ruins of blankets and cardboard boxes were scattered all over, and that's where he landed. They'd been soaking up rain water, so when he put his weight on it, dirty water would ooze out with a splurching sound. Tons of empty bottles were lined up in the corner and there was a stone weight on top of a pile of shopping bags. It was a lonely place. He could never be able to stand being there all alone for an extended period of time.

There was a huge number of marks on the wall. A rusty portable stove and kettle were on the ground. There were beat up, rotting books all about. Clothes that had mostly lost their original color were delicately folded and stacked on top of each other. Not a single person had come here in over 10 years.

There were white things scattered on the ground. Maybe because rats had been chewed on them, they'd lost their original shape. His mother's bones had been broken into little pieces and buried in the wet ground. As he gathered them up, he thought about how his mother had been given to the town of Morioh. Part of her became food for the rats, part of her was absorbed into the ground, and part of her had become dust and dissolved into the air.

Some of her hair was buried in a soft patch of ground. When he pulled on it, up came what seemed like a head's worth of long hair along with the mud. Takuma's ten fingers tangled in it. He'd never seen hair as frayed as this.

He took all of his mother's things that had been between the buildings back with him. Among them were a black-jeweled necklace and a postcard.

'Taking revenge on my father. I lived thinking only of that.'

The fragments of the shattered fountain pen fell next to him. Crushing them under his foot, Takuma stood up. He felt like his knees would collapse if he relaxed them at all. But he felt like he could keep fighting for another minute or two.

Higashikata Jousuke remained silent. He stood up without any reaction. He was still within the two-meter range as he had been for so long now. He looked like he was reaching his limit just like Takuma. There was enough lost blood trickling down the roof to have caused a normal person to lose consciousness a long time ago.

'With those injuries, you might wanna get to a hospital soon or you're gonna die of blood loss,' advised Takuma. It was hard for him to talk with his broken teeth.

When he had jumped from the hospital in an attempt to kill himself, he'd cut the blood vessels in his neck on branches. At the time, he was able to survive thanks to the doctors and nurses immediately coming to his aid. But there were no doctors here.

'I think I got enough time to finish this thing up.'

Crazy Diamond clenched its fist. Its body was covered in injuries as well, but its fighting spirit hadn't dulled in the least. Far from it. There was a bright, divine aura emanating from the injured Stand.

'Senpai, I'm gonna wait for you, so you better get ready. With the next one, I'm gonna end this. You can count on that.'

Wiping blood off his mouth, Takuma picked The Book up off the ground.

'It looks to me that you want to prove that your fists are faster regardless of what I do.'

It seemed that Jousuke wanted a pure test of speed, free of any tricks, between his fists and Takuma's pages.

'But I'm the faster one.'

He knew what his mistake had been in the last bout. It was the number of pages in The Book. He'd lived too long. His long life had caused more and more of his past to accumulate, adding more and more descriptions, resulting in more and more pages needing to be traversed until he reached the memory he was after. Against Crazy Diamond and his overwhelmingly fast fists, that time loss was fatal.

But a large number of pages had been lost since then, carried off by the wind into the town's sky. They wouldn't be coming back. So now The Books would be faster than Crazy Diamond's fist. Thanks to the decreased number of pages, the amount of time it would take to get to any page in the past was shortened.

'Next time it'll be the traffic accident memory. Every bone in your body is going to break up here on this roof. Just imagine what injuries like that would be like on top of the ones you've got now. There'll be no coming back from that.'

Perhaps because of dizziness due to blood loss, Jousuke's body swayed a bit. But his eyes were focused on his target. He laughed at Takuma's words.

'I'm gonna beat the crap outta yer book, and then shove it in the bargain bin at the used bookstore and make sure it roasts in the sunlight so all the color fades.'

Takuma placed The Book closed on top of his right hand. He breathed in deeply and cold air filled his lungs. They both wanted this over with before they lost consciousness. It was so quiet they could hear each other breathe. Neither could move a finger as they faced one another.

The clouds cleared and the moon peeked out, making the area a bit brighter. The snowflakes fluttering down through the sky shimmered in the moonlight and that scene on the roof was so beautiful it barely felt real.

Where is this? Outer space? The lights extending out beneath them and the white specks in the space around them all seemed to be glistening like stars.

Crazy Diamond stepped forward. At the same time, The Book's leather cover opened. There was no gap of time between the start of the two events. Now that so many pages had disappeared, the inside of Takuma's head felt lighter. Profoundly memorable scenes of his life were appearing one by one and being pushed back by other pages, passing right by him. Moment by moment, scene after scene flashed through his head.

He had shown her Jupiter through the telescope. Orbs that were unable to become fixed stars surfaced in the darkness without a sound.

In the reflection of puddles lit up by the morning sun, he saw a post stabbed with a knife.

The boy that would never stop crying had at some point learned to hold back his tears. He'd gotten taller, too.

The wind shook the tree branches and the children were afraid of the creaking sound they made.

He had met many people in the time from when he'd been born up until now. He'd had more conversations than he could count. In the time he'd spent alone, he'd strung together many words in his mind. Was there really any meaning to remembering things, in the end? If he died, all of those memories would disappear. All those emotions that had emerged from his heart wouldn't end up anywhere. They would just disappear. Like drops of water soaked up by the ground. Maybe that's why that girl was writing a novel?

He heard Jousuke's voice. No, it was Crazy Diamond that was raising its voice. That emotionless statue was now opening its mouth and letting out a scream.

The Book, faster! Speed up your pages! Words formed in his mind, directed towards the leather-bound book. They had to make it to a forbidden section before that fist reached him.

Before long, the glistening flecks started to condensate on the gaps between the pages. Maybe it was light caused by friction with the air or it just looked that way because his pupils were dilated, but The Book appeared to start shaking little by little and the threads that bound the papers started to fray. That leather cover his hands had gotten so used to contracted and a crack appeared in it.

Light flooded out from the crevice in the cover and leaked out between the gaps in his fingers.

It was a dazzling white light.

Just a few more pages and he would have reached the traffic accident.

But that page would never be turned to.

The turning pages bent, broke apart, and flew away. He saw his own blood scattering around him. The second hit arrived before he felt any pain. Then Crazy Diamond unleashed a third and a fourth hit.

Every time it hit him, it yelled out '*DORAAH!*' Fists as hard and heavy as concrete continuously pounded his body. The yells just kept coming, like a barrage of machine gun fire.

His body bent back and forth and he felt like every each and every bone in his body was breaking. Yet the fists still kept coming. Every rib from his 1st to his 12th were pulverized. His shoulder blades, his collarbone and his humerus bone made snapping sounds as they were crushed. Fragments of his femur and hipbone were scattered inside of his body. Every last blood vessel was ruptured, his sinew was flattened, and he could feel the shape of his face changing. His mother and father disappeared from inside his head.

Before long, Crazy Diamond's screams disappeared. Takuma's body was thrown back from the impact of the punches. Back to where there was no footing.

His whole field of vision was night sky. With the white moon peeking out from the clouds, the countless flecks of snow stood out. In that state of not knowing which way was up, down, left, or right, his body was flung into the void. The Book was falling beside him, falling apart to the point of no longer looking like a book, with the pages breaking into fragments. Jousuke leaned out over the edge of the roof and reached his arm out towards Takuma.

It was a memory from the moment he was born. When he was a small child, it had been buried by other memories, so he couldn't remember it. But once he became able to use The Book, he could organize his memories so he could read back any description whenever he wanted. On that day, he exited his mother's womb and plopped into the muddy water. There, between the buildings, on top of the muddy ground, there formed a puddle of blood and amniotic fluid. With the umbilical cord still connected, he fell into that puddle. It was the first calamity of his life. He was cold and helpless, with hazy vision, and had no idea what was going on. But before long, his mother held him up in her arms, wiping the muddy water off of his body. He clung to those arms without knowing what he was doing and felt an extraordinary sense of relief. He frantically drew breath, taking air into his lungs. Gluing his head to his mother's chest, he could hear her heartbeat, which calmed him down. He spent three days between the buildings with his mother. He was sleeping all the time, but when he would

occasionally wake up, his mother would look into his eyes, stroke his body with her hands, and talk to him. He couldn't understand the words at the time, so he only heard them as sounds. Later, reliving the past scene in his head with The Book, he found out what it was his mother was saying. From far off, he could hear intermittent music. Later, he would figure out that it was Mozart music. He must have sensed his mother's wishes by instinct. He gained the ability to "not forget".

The wall covered in thorns was right in front of his nose. The spotlights shone on him, casting a shadow. Nothing was below his feet. All he could see was the ground, far away. His body was hanging there like an apple on a branch.

Higashikata Jousuke was hanging off the edge of the roof, gripping Takuma's left arm. Specifically, it was the sleeve of his school uniform he was grabbing and it was only between his pointer finger, middle finger, and thumb. He was still bleeding just as badly as he had been before. There was no sign of Crazy Diamond. He was probably gone because Jousuke had used the last of his energy hitting Takuma.

He couldn't hear a single sound. It seemed he'd lost use of his hearing. Jousuke said something to Takuma while he was looking down at him, but the scene was silent to him. Though he could tell what he meant, since he could read lips. Jousuke was telling him to reach the other arm up. Unable to bear his weight, his uniform's left sleeve started to tear at the shoulder.

A number of reasons why Jousuke might be trying to save him right now crossed Takuma's mind. Maybe he never intended to go as far as taking Takuma's life to begin with. Or maybe he wanted to hear more about the eternal mystery surrounding *him*.

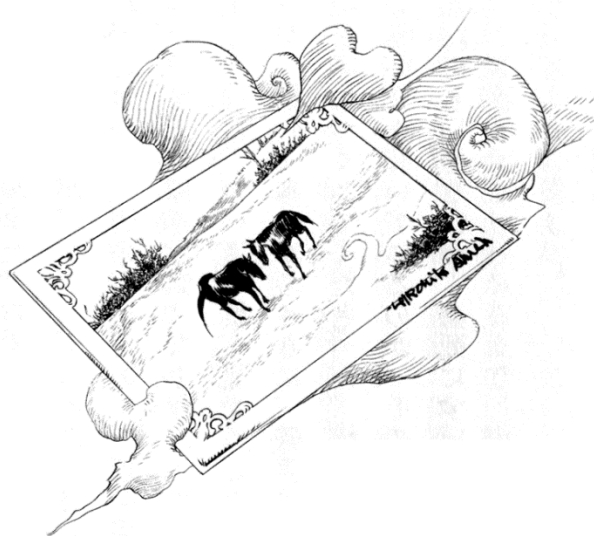
He couldn't see The Book anywhere. It had seemingly already come apart completely, including both covers and the spine. There were tons of pages floating around behind Jousuke's overhanging body; enough paper to cover the night sky. There were as many pages as things he'd seen and heard or emotions that swelled up within him. He's gained enough words in this town to fill up the sky.

'The other arm,' Jousuke said through a pained expression. His body looked like it was at its physical limit, too. Takuma mustered up his remaining strength and lifted up his dangling right hand. Broken bones were poking through his skin. Moving his fingers covered in blood, he undid the gold buttons of his school uniform jacket one by one.

Undoing just one of them took a long time. The moment he'd undone the last button, he met eyes with Jousuke. The inside of his mouth was in an awful state, so he didn't say anything. A long period of silence passed by. It was as though the rotation of the Earth itself had stopped and he had an extensive view of the scene around him, Jousuke's expression, as well as every last page of the book. If his ears were in their usual state, then he probably could've heard the sound of the papers rubbing against each other, not unlike the sound of flipping through a book.

Pulled by the earth, his body slipped out from his jacket. The roof where Jousuke was grew farther away as he fell down along the thorn-covered red brick wall. A strong wind blew in the sky above the octagonal dome and the seven spires of the Thorn Building and the many pages flew into a vortex. Before long, just as they rose high into the sky like a flock of birds flying away, they disappeared as if dissolving into the wind.

Final Chapter



Communio

Lux æterna luceat eis, Domine:
Cum Sanctis tuis in æternum,
quia pius es.

Requiem æternam dona eis Domine:
et lux perpetua luceat eis.

Cum Sanctis tuis in æternum,
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Final Chapter
Communio

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[TL Note: This section "Communion" also sometimes called "Lux aterna" (Eternal Light) is a chant in the later part of the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass after Dies Irae. Originally in Latin, it translates to the following.]

Communion

May everlasting light shine upon them
O Lord, with thy saints in eternity,
for thou art merciful

Grant them eternal rest,
O Lord, and may everlasting light
shine upon them.

---1---

The child, having just been born, was quite small. He started moving on his own, and was soft and squishy. It was all blue at first, but red started to peek in. The connection to his body of blood and flesh fell away and he became a lone being. His umbilical cord had been cut with a piece of a mirror. It felt like cutting rubber. She didn't mind the postpartum pain she felt as she gazed at the crying baby in her arms. The buck-naked baby moved his little arms and legs. He had tiny little fingernails at the end of each finger so small you couldn't see them without a magnifying glass, but they were certainly there. God had made him without missing even the smallest detail. The baby in her arms pressed his small head against Akari's chest. Perhaps because he heard her heartbeat, the baby stopped crying. She let him suckle on her nipple to give him milk.

The baby's little mouth frantically stuck to it, filling her heart with delight at how adorable he was.

She tied a cord to the handle of the basket she'd made by weaving together plant materials and, as the rope began to be pulled upwards, Akari put her baby inside it. If that baby had been born in the circumstances of a normal life, she wouldn't have let go of him for an instant. But it was impossible to raise him between the buildings.

The basket the baby was in was pulled upwards by his father. Seeing that child rise up through the gap between those perfectly flat walls, it looked to her like he was being sucked up by the heavens above. Like he was being taken away somewhere into the heavens beyond the blue sky.

She'd made a deal that until she knew the baby was all secured in a safe place, she wouldn't say where the bag was. Keeping hidden, he took pictures of the baby being discovered by people working at a temple, and subsequently taken into custody by orphanage home for infants. He threw the developed photos down from the roof, and she acknowledged that her child was far away from that detestable place. Then, Akari spoke the "magic words" at last. With her throat that couldn't vocalize things well, she yelled.

'Between the buildings! Between the buildings! Between the buildings!'

He was allowed by Akari to collect the bag that had fallen between the pipes. He threw down the tools for it from the roof. After that, he pulled it up in essentially the same way he had the baby, and never came back to the roof again.

Akari lived for a number of days in that place like that. She sat covered in mud, leaning her back against a wall. In the mornings, she could hear people going to work, and in the evenings she could sense them returning to their homes. Her mind drifted to the lives being led in the town of Morioh.

It grew dark and quiet around her and stars shined in the narrow strip of night sky. Countless speckles of light that existed above humans' heads since the age of myths.

Even when that child learned to stand up and speak real words, the stars in the sky would still be shining. Even if there came a day when he wondered if he had a father and mother of his own, those lights would still be filling up the darkness. She imagined how terrifying it must be for him to be alone, but just thinking that he was out there somewhere made her heart overflow with emotion. Her anxieties disappeared, and only calm emotions remained.

Every night, Akari would close her eyes thinking of the child that had come out of her body. There was always a grown boy in her dreams. On the meadow with the wind blowing was the boy was standing in a black school uniform. Realizing that Akari had arrived, he turned to look towards her and gave a nod. He wasn't lonely. No one was

lonely. Not a single person living in the whole wide world was, she thought, every time she saw him in her dreams.

---2---

The fire that had broken out on March 17th, 2000 did not move to any of the surrounding buildings; it simply died out after one private house burned to ash. In the ruins of the fire, a man's burnt corpse was found. It was determined from the dental records that it was the body of the house's owner, Futaba Teruhiko. But he didn't die from smoke inhalation; he was already dead before the fire started. Due to a lack of any evidence that he tried to escape the fire and because of a mark that remained on his rib, it was conjectured that he died by being stabbed in the chest with a sharp object. A kitchen knife was found in the flowerbed and it had blood of the same type as Futaba Teruhiko's on it. As the handle of the knife had the fingerprints of his daughter, Futaba Chiho on it, the possibility that she had a part in both his murder and in starting the fire was brought up.

Late at night that same day, the body of a high school boy was discovered in front of the front entrance to the Thorn Building. Ambulance workers had found him collapsed facedown with a thin layer of snow piled on his back. They had been called there to the library by phone just a bit earlier. The identity of the informer is unknown. They had hung up the phone without giving their name.

The collapsed high school boy was named Hasumi Takuma and was a 2nd year at Budougaoka High School. His body had suffered severe injuries. It is thought that after having suffered comminuted fractures all over his body, he fell from the roof to his death. The director of an orphanage took charge of his body, and a memorial service was held at a nearby temple. There is evidence that Hasumi Takuma had a close relationship with Futaba Chiho, which led to speculation of some connection to the fire.

No one has seen Futaba Chiho since the night of the 17th when the fire occurred. Her body was not found in the remnants of the house, and she did not return to school after spring vacation ended. Why did Futaba Chiho start the fire? Why did the high school boy die in such a place? Time passed by without any answers coming to light.

Those are all the details that were known to the public. I learned those things from the newspapers, the news shows, and from gossip from my family. It was a hot topic in class for a while after spring vacation ended, but before too long, people stopped discussing it and forgot about it. Just as most people had forgotten that I'd been the first person to find a woman dead, daily life continued as if there never had been students called Hasumi Takuma or Futaba Chiho to begin with.

All we could do was guess what was really going on with that boy. I pieced together information as I visited Jousuke-kun injured in his hospital room and Okuyasu-kun sick with the flu in his hospital room. When they were found, they were both near death, but they underwent treatment at the hospital and somehow seemed to be on the

way to full recovery. By the way, even though they were discovered at the library, they weren't taken in for questioning by the police thanks to Kishibe Rohan altering the ambulance workers' memories.

'I have a little sister named Chiho.'

Hasumi Takuma had said something like that during a conversation with Okuyasu-kun.

Also, he seemed to have a grudge against his father.

'I went to collect my mother's bones. I lived my life thinking only of revenge against my father.'

Jousuke-kun said he'd heard Hasumi Takuma say that.

We imagined the whole web of relationships Hasumi Takuma had. He was thrown into Morioh as an orphan, but by using his Stand ability it looked like he was able to learn about his parents. And it also seemed that Futaba Teruhiko was his father? Outwardly, Futaba Chiho and Hasumi Takuma were boyfriend and girlfriend, but apparently that was a front. But why fake that? To get close to his own father? But if he was just going to kill his father and burn his house down, then why would he need to get close to his half-sister? Maybe it was just because he wanted to talk with someone with whom he had a blood connection.

And why did he have to kill Orikasa Hanae? From Kishibe Rohan's subsequent investigation, we were able to find out that Futaba Teruhiko had a close connection with her. He had been the one putting money in her bank account, supporting her livelihood. We also found that the two of them were in different years at the same school at high school age and moved to Morioh at about the same time. So perhaps she played some role in Hasumi Takuma's life.

These were all just guesses. I wasn't even sure if anybody that knew all his motives and feelings even existed. All we could do was imagine the story behind this whole thing. Jousuke-kun had tried to save him, but he chose death instead, taking his secrets forever with him.

Time passed, and before I knew it, it was summer.

The town flower is the amur adonis.

Its specialty dish is misozuke ox tongue.

According to the 1999 census, its population was 58,723 people.

Morioh was a commuter town to S City and from the beginning of 1980, it was rapidly developing.

But its history goes much further back. It has Jomon Era settlements, and in the age of the samurai it apparently had vacation homes and martial arts training grounds.

There were rumors that it would soon be absorbed into the S City proper, but at the moment it was an independent municipality.

A female reporter was giving background on Morioh on TV. A huge condo was shown behind her, and pointing at it, she said, 'If you'll take a look behind me, you'll see one of the newly discovered illegal constructions.' Mom and Big Sis were sitting in the living room watching TV and eating watermelon. Our neighborhood wasn't so new that it would get on TV. My dad tried to lower the AC and my mom and sister objected. Dad called for my help, but just then I got a call from Yukako-san, so I went back to my room. She suggested over the phone that we go study at the library.

It was August 2000, and school had now entered summer vacation. I put my study materials into my backpack, got on my bicycle, and started biking towards the library. I'd gotten this bike as a present for starting high school, and now one year later it was still accident-free and I was still able to comfortably pedal the pedals. The heat haze on the road quivered and the chorus of cicadas sounded as loud as an earth tremor. The sky was a kind of deep-blue that looked like paint that had been sealed to keep water off started to be filled with cumulonimbus clouds that looked like enormous castles. I passed by a car that seemed to be heading to the beach, and by the time I got to the front of the train station, my whole body was dripping with sweat.

I met her by coincidence. I thought I'd go get some cold juice at the vending machine, and if I hadn't stopped my bike at the bus roundabout, I probably never would've ended up talking to her.

When I got in front of the vending machine, just as I was about to take out 100 yen, a girl sitting on the bench caught the corner of my eye. The bench was the bus stop for the non-stop bus to S City. She turned around and looked at me, and I recognized her face. Our eyes met, too.

At first, I thought I thought I just had the wrong person, but then I realized it really was her. I put my wallet back in my pocket and walked my bike with me over to her. She didn't try to stand up or run; she just opened her mouth a bit in surprise and looked at me. She was wearing clothes that looked cool with an open neck and a necklace with a black jewel hanging around her neck.

'Is that you, Chiho-san?'

Even though we'd only met the one time in the library, she seemed to remember me. Her face broke into a smile. It was a light and airy expression like a four-leaf clover growing on a river embankment. She'd been missing for five months, but she showed no sign of fatigue or weakness. Her hair was shorter than it was last time I saw her. Her ears and neck were exposed and she looked well ventilated. Her irises had a brown hue that was lighter than most peoples', making the pupils in the centers stand out. She seemed like the kind of girl with such sweet facial features that no boy could look at her and not feel their heartbeat quicken.

I heard a *plunk* sound of water splashing. A turtle had jumped into the pond in the middle of the roundabout, which was glistening white in the sunlight. There were no tall

buildings nearby; it was just one wide open space. I sat next to her on the bench and started talking to her.

'Where are you living now?'

'My mom's house.'

She spoke naturally, like it was just every-day small talk.

'Your mom's house? But the police are looking for you, aren't they?'

Her skin was very white, even though it was summer. I could practically see through to her blood vessels. It was a starkly different color from my skin that had tanned from the summer sunlight. Evidently, she wasn't going out much.

'It's thanks to my mom that the police haven't found me. She's been covering for me.'

Apparently today she had happened to take a day trip back to Morioh. She said it could be dangerous if people saw her, but she went anyhow because she had friends she just really missed. She'd had a friend who went to a girls' high school in S City whom apparently lived in Morioh. They'd exchanged phone numbers but she couldn't get in contact. So she covertly went to check on her house, only to find she'd moved away, so in the end she wasn't able to meet her. Left without any options, she was going to buy some doughnuts and head home, but the shop she liked was closed, too. So now she was feeling disappointed and was complaining about how coming to Morioh turned out to be a total waste of time.

'All the things I'm familiar with in this town disappeared, like my life never happened in the first place.'

'It's probably for the best. Though not being able to get in contact with your friend or your favorite store being gone are definitely just coincidences. I think you're better off not having things in Morioh to be looking back at.'

'The bus should be getting here soon. The one to S City. I'm going to get on it to get back to where my mom is,' said Chiho, looking at the clock on the front of the train station building. That clock had broken in the winter but at some point it looked like it'd been fixed. Her mother must've been living at her new spouse's house, though I wasn't sure if that house was in S City or she was going to take a train or bus from S City to somewhere even farther away.

'There's a lot I'd like to ask you about, actually. Me and the others have been looking for you. We wanted to ask about that Hasumi Takuma person...'

She kept silent.

'You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. It's all in the past now, anyway.'

Her eyes turned towards the surface of the pond. The wind made the green leaves of the shrubs next to the train station rustle.

The bus to S City arrived at the roundabout. It slowed down, and as the body of the bus shook, it came to a halt at the bus stop. The bus's windows were dazzling due to the reflection of the sun. Futaba Chiho stood up and picked up her bag.

I suddenly remembered that I'd heard she was writing a novel. That night, Hasumi Takuma's bag had fallen on the stairs of the library. Stuffed inside it was what seemed to be the manuscript of a novel which had "By Futaba Chiho" printed on the front of it. We'd judged that it was most likely written by her.

'What about the end of your novel? Did you finish it already?'

When I asked that, Futaba Chiho turned back towards me with a surprised look on her face. The fabric of the spacious, thin clothing she was wearing shook.

The bus's door opened with a *pssh* sound.

'You read it?'

'Yeah. But it stopped right at the good part. How does that novel end?'

It was a novel set in Morioh. But it wasn't written all the way to the end. It cut off right at an exciting scene. Futaba Chiho started at me for a short while. The wind blew and rustled her short hair.

'Well, it ends with a happy ending, of course,' she sniffled. She looked like she might burst into tears at any moment.

'But I haven't been able to finish writing it. Everything I saved was lost in the fire. I've gotta start over from the beginning. This is so stupid. Hirose-san, you won't report me to the police, right?'

'I decided I'm just going to leave you be. It's just, seeing you there, sitting on the bench before... I wasn't sure. I thought maybe you hadn't realized. Did you... um, not know? The person you were going out with... Hasumi Takuma...'

She kept her mouth closed and lightly shook her head. I realized I didn't need to say anything more. She knew about her blood connection to Hasumi Takuma. Maybe she'd heard it directly from him or maybe her dad had told her right before he died.

The bus's driver looked towards us. He seemed to be wondering if we were going to get on or not. Futaba Chiho called towards the bus. 'I'm getting on, just wait one minute.'

She suddenly grabbed my hands. Her slender fingers were cold enough to make me feel a chill.

'Hirose-san, have you ever wished you could travel to the future? That's how I feel right now. "Time" itself is being created inside here.'

She guided my hand and pressed it against her belly. The surface my palm touched the soft fabric of her clothing. On the other side of her clothes was something round. Futaba Chiho's body was very thin with frail arms and shoulders like the ends of tree branches, yet her belly alone was swollen. When she got up from the bench, that swelling became much more apparent.

My heart started beating faster, and it felt hard to breathe. My sense of ethics and moral outlook felt a shock and shriveled up in fear. It was sinful. This was most likely the complete form of the revenge Hasumi Takuma imagined.

'Have you ever thought about trying to die?' she asked me with her hand on her stomach.

'I don't spite that person. Far from it, even now... I'm thankful he left this child with me. And you know, I've come to feel that when this child is born, it will mean that person's life won't have been completely wasted in the end.'

I imagined that night. The conversation between daughter and father. Blood spilled and flames burned everything. And at the focal point of all that, I'm sure, was this child.

Her standing in front of me was terrifying. If someone unaware of the situation saw her, they would just see a sweet pregnant woman. But what I saw was someone driven out of paradise, destined to eternally wander the wilderness, a sinner.

'Are you living in the city now?'

Where in the world was she going?

'No,' she said, shaking her head.

'My mom's house is in a place with a great view. Our property has a meadow and when the wind blows, it makes waves in the grass just like the ocean. Our horses roam free on it and we can have fun and play games together as their hair flutters in the breeze. Like kids. I don't have anything to worry about there; it's like a dream world. Goodbye, Hirose-san. Please give my regards to everyone in Morioh, won't you?'

With a lonesome look on her face, Futaba Chiho went through the opened door onto the bus. Without turning back, she rose up the steps and disappeared inside. The door closed, the frame of the bus shook, and the engine started. Then the bus started to take off at a leisurely pace.

I thought of just walking away and just acting like I hadn't seen anything. I'd pretend I hadn't noticed her. But I stood still on that spot.

I felt like if I just said something, then that mother and child would be saved. I yelled, 'Far away! Go far away! Far enough away that even fate won't follow you!'

There was no sign that she heard me among the sounds of the engine. But I caught my words in the air with Echoes. My long-tailed Stand delivered the words to her at the back of the bus and etched them into her heart.

As the bus turned around the roundabout, I could see her through the window looking towards me as she wiped her eyes and nodded.

God, please have mercy on that mother and child. May where the two of them are going have a peaceful home with food to eat.

After making its route around the roundabout, the bus exited to a straight road and began to pick up speed, heading out of Morioh to somewhere far away. And before too long, it was out of sight.

Postscript

When I was 16 years old, I wrote a novel called "Summer and the Fireworks and My Corpse". In my mind, I did the camera blocking like how Araki Hirohiko-sensei did his. It was a story about a protagonist that accidentally killed his friend, hid the body, and attempted to get away without being caught. When writing the scenes where the corpse might get discovered by somebody, the GOGOGOGOGO sound effect was rumbling in my head. I submitted that novel for the Shueisha Jump Novel Grand Prix, which ended with me getting my professional debut as an author.

The Jump Novel Grand Prix. At the time, it was called the Jump Novel/Nonfiction Award. The award was managed by a place called the Shueisha j-Books editorial department, so I read a lot of books that were published from them. "Jihad", "Midnight★Magic", "Sleeping Beauty the Magic User" were the kinds of books that were on bookstore shelves when I was first starting out. I remember buying issues of V Jump hoping for news about "Combustible Campus Guardress". And the j-Books editorial department also published novels based on popular manga. For example, I devoured the "BASTARD!!" novel and of course, I read the "Jojo's Bizarre Adventure Part 3" novel. When I submitted my novel for the Jump Novel Grand Prix, I was secretly thinking this:

'If I win this award, then maybe they'll let me novelize a manga, too!'

Five years after my debut, I finally got my chance. One day when I was visiting the Shueisha editorial department, I learned about a "Jojo's Bizarre Adventure Part 5" novel being published. I seemed odd to me. There'd already been a Part 3 novel published, you'd think they'd do a Part 4 novel next. So why'd they skip right over that to a novel for Part 5? So I asked about it.

'Why aren't you doing a novel for "Jojo" Part 4? Oh, and if by any chance you just don't have anyone to write it, mind if I do?'

In the five years since then, I've been continuously writing a "Jojo's Bizarre Adventure Part 4" novel. The already-published Part 3 and Part 5 novels were original stories that borrowed lore from the series, so I decided to follow suit. But it turned out to be a pretty challenging task and I ended up generating a huge stack of rejected manuscript pages. I ended up writing full 400-page manuscripts that I ultimately wasn't happy with, so I scrapped them and started from scratch again and again. In these five years, I've now thrown out over 2,000 manuscript pages and I lost my source of income. I mean, of course I was, I wasn't putting out any new books, all I was doing was producing rejected manuscripts. Left without any other option, I took a different job to earn a living in the interim while I wrote the "Jojo" novel.

While I was rewriting it, the entirety of the novel changed over and over. A few years back in a magazine-book called "Yomu Jump", the opening section of a later rejected version of my novel was published. Back then, Araki-sensei had even drawn illustrations for it, but because I changed what the story was about, in the end they couldn't be used for this book. I'm honestly sorry about that.

In those five years, I've been thinking about this novel constantly. In the time I was writing it and erasing it, I moved three times and even got married. In that period, a "Death Note" novel and a "Kochira Katsushikaku Kameari Kouenmae Hashutsujo" novel were published. I got flustered. But despite that, I had fun. The fact that I'd had made my debut as an author at j-Books so I could do this job made it all worth it. I was actually pretty lucky that they didn't have a Part 4 novelization done. Back when I was in my teens, I'd daydreamed about how if I was gonna do a "Jojo" novel, then doing a Part 4 one would be really sweet. Now I can say that that dream came true.

And now, at last, the "Jojo's Bizarre Adventure Part 4" novel has been published. I'm really glad it did. I've taken every measure so that even those that haven't read the manga can enjoy it. Though there were some spots where there wasn't much I could do. Regardless, if you found this novel interesting, please be sure to read the manga, "Jojo's Bizarre Adventure." By the way, Part 4 is volumes 29 to 47 (In the bunkobans, it's volumes 18 to 29).

Lastly, I have so much thanks to everyone involved in publishing this book. And most of all, to Araki Hirohiko-sensei. For providing us all this this miraculous manga experience, I offer you my most heartfelt gratitude.

Otsu Ichi

===Plot Revelations Guide/Analysis (Contains Spoilers)===

Hey, it's Kewl0210, the translator, here. For my own reference I made a guide on when various story revelations to make sure I didn't lose track of any plot threads and translated the story with a thorough understanding of the mysteries and the themes. Partially because in a lot of places in this book, little tidbits of new information are dropped and are meant to be major plot revelations and it can be easy to lose track of what the reader knows, what the reader should be wondering at any point, and what characters know and what their intentions are, especially when much of this story is told non-linearly. Knowing all that is important in making foreshadowing work properly, too. I made this when I was in the editing-phase, mind you. I liked it quite a bit, seeing all this information laid out like this, so I figured I'd include it at the very end of my translation. A lot of it turned into an analysis of the central themes of the story, as well, in order to make sense of it all. Though there are definitely some things left up to interpretation. Spending all these years on this ended me up being a little obsessed with it, I think. Anyhow, I'm very interested to hear any other opinions from anybody if you have them.

This contains spoilers, so I HIGHLY recommend you don't read this until you've finished the whole book.

The major mysteries are:

1. Who is the person that was between the buildings for a year in the prologue?
2. Who dies in the prologue?
3. Why does Chiho kill the person in the prologue?
4. Who killed Orikasa Hanae?
5. What are Takuma's Stand/natural abilities?
6. What are Takuma's motivations in the present timeline?
7. Was it Takuma that rescued Chiho October 21st 1997? If so, why did he lie about it?
8. How much does Chiho know about Takuma/Akari/Oogami Teruhiko?
9. What's the nature of Chiho and Takuma's relationship? Does Takuma actually care about Chiho or is he doing it to keep up appearances?
10. What happened to Akari? (Also stuff like, what happened to her parents, why is she never found, etc.)
11. What are Oogami Teruhiko's plans/motivations?
12. What happened to Oogami Teruhiko after the events of 1981-1982?
13. Who has the Memory of Jet Stand ability?
14. What does the Memory of Jet ability do?
15. Who's the guy from Jousuke's memory when he was 4?
16. What is Takuma's revenge plan and what actions has he taken off-screen?
17. Why did Chiho's house catch on fire?
18. Why does Oogami/Futaba Teruhiko say "It's dark"? What does he know at the end of 3-8?
19. What's the significance of the religious references?
20. What are Takuma's plans after he gets revenge? Why does he kill himself?
21. What's with the literary references?

There's a bunch of other little things but that's the main stuff.

Here are all the answers, best I can figure.

1. Who is the person that was between the buildings for a year?

1. Akari.

2. Who dies in the prologue?

Oogami/Futaba Teruhiko.

3. Why does Chiho kill the person in the prologue?

Chiho killed him for what he did to Takuma's mom, Akari, and because she loved Takuma.

But also it seems there's a possibility that Oogami/Futaba Teruhiko just went crazy when he realized what had happened and attacked her.

So then she used the knife to defend herself. It's never made fully clear. Takuma said he didn't expect Oogami to die or the house to light on fire.

So he hadn't planted memories in Chiho's mind to make her do that. The "he went crazy" thing was his speculation.

4. Who killed Orikasa Hanae?

Takuma. He either kills her because he doesn't want her interfering with his revenge, or because he knew she was an accomplice in the Akari situation.

It seems that he found her to begin with because she visited the infant home Takuma was left in. She might've been thinking about adopting him. But she didn't. He was eventually able to find her because of a record of it left there. He didn't want anyone alive to know about his connection to Oogami Teruhiko.

The reason he may not have known she was involved was he said he 'didn't have to kill her if she hadn't visited the home for infants'. However she was receiving money from Oogami Teruhiko on a regular basis. Probably to keep her quiet. Orikasa Hanae didn't seem to like him much, but she preferred getting his money over screwing him over by telling the police what he did. So Takuma may have found out that way, because of the money flow.

5. What are Takuma's Stand/natural abilities?

He remembers everything that he sees and it's stored in text form in his Stand, The Book. The text is all in 1st person (Unlike the novel which is all 3rd person except for Kouichi's chapters for some reason) and it records everything he does, thinks, and feels. When he relives the abilities by reading them (or when someone else reads them) he both sees them from his original perspective and from a top-down view.

He can store memories and relive them whenever he wants and also force others to undergo events in his memory with his "Empathy" ability. Empathy is called that after the ability of an author to make you empathize with a character.

It doesn't work on animals, people that can't read, and people who can't see the words in the book.

It has a 2 meter range and can't kill instantly (Because he has no memories of being killed instantly).

The Book cannot exit a 30-meter range of him, and if it does it disappears and he can summon it again by willing it to appear. He can't seem to just make it disappear and come back to him though, though that's never stated explicitly. Because of this he can tear out a page or leave the book lying open somewhere and if someone within 2 meters sees it, even if he's not holding it, they'll be affected by the Empathy ability. And it will disappear if he goes over 30 meters from it.

As a small child, he simply had the ability to "never forget". But this came with the caveat of involuntary memories reliving complete painful experiences as opposed to vague "recollections".

Seemingly the ability to never forget was an incomplete form of the Stand. Takuma thinks at one point: "As a child, he'd believed it to have appeared so he could organize his out-of-control memories. But wasn't it actually the other way around? Wasn't it because he had this ability lying dormant in him that he was able to remember everything to begin with?"

He inherited having a Stand ability from his father, Oogami Teruhiko, who got his Stand from being struck by an arrowhead. His ability to never forget seemingly was also influenced by his mother's experiences while she was pregnant with him. The text says that he sensed his mother's wishes by instinct and gained the ability to "not forget".

6. What are Takuma's motivations in the present timeline?

He finds out about how his mother was tortured and dedicates his life to getting revenge on his father, Oogami/Futaba Teruhiko. Primarily, he finds out about this from reading his old memories as an infant when his mother talked to him right after he was born. The reader isn't told WHAT she says to him, just that she talks to him. But there doesn't seem to be any other way he could find out.

He befriends Chiho in order to get close to his father. He reveals he's going to expose his crimes to him and shows him the necklace so he knows it's revenge for Akari. Though the "main" part of the plan is impregnating Chiho. He says the crime stuff was "a side show for the most part". Seemingly he started investigating his dad soon after he got the The Book ability. So before he met Chiho. And from how he randomly saves her, it sounds like it was part of a plan to get close to her, specifically because Oogami cared so much about her.

He doesn't plan to kill Oogami Teruhiko, he instead wanted Oogami to live and suffer. But he ends up dying anyhow because Chiho stabs him to death with a knife.

He probably impregnated her as part of his revenge on his father and his "bloodline" as he calls it.

He had investigated how Oogami Teruhiko was living his life in the present and found that he really cared about his daughter, so part of his revenge was impregnating her. Putting her against him may have just happened on its own. He wanted to "upset Oogami Teruhiko's quiet life".

It's suggested that Takuma could "dump his brain" into her, but he doesn't. She kills Oogami Teruhiko on her own. It MAY be implied that the reason he impregnates Chiho is because he wants Oogami Teruhiko to "relieve the experience" of his mother.

Fitting with the "relieved memories" theme. He's a man so he can't get pregnant so this was the next closest thing, given how important she was to him.

(He does something similar to the guy in chapter 2-6 with the angel ring. Making him relive the experience of cutting Takuma's cheek with a punch.)

7. Was it Takuma that rescued Chiho October 21st 1997? If so, why did he lie about it?

Yes. He lied because he lived his life plotting revenge and had a traumatic childhood so he couldn't open up to anyone. Possibly also to build himself up to Chiho as some kind of magnanimous, selfless protector who helped her and refused to even take credit, and allowing her to find out on her own. Thus getting her to open up to him. As a childhood protector similar to Jousuke's idol worship of the pompadour guy.

Also because he was planning to use her in his revenge against Oogami Teruhiko and decided that was more important than whatever affection he had for Chiho.

8. How much does Chiho know about Takuma/Akari/Oogami Teruhiko?

At the end of chapter 2-4 Chiho indicates that she "knows some things" she doesn't tell Takuma she knows. Though she's not sure if he was the one that rescued her in 1995, she thinks his concern about Orikasa Hanae indicates that he killed her.

Towards the end it's revealed that her father clipped the newspaper article about Orikasa Hanae dying and she found that Orikasa Hanae was one of her father's old lovers. She also learns about Takuma's skill with a knife and how he's ok with cutting off the angel-ring guy's ear.

She also learned about the old couple whose daughter died in an early chapter and about the woman who had lived between the buildings when it's mentioned in the prologue. So likely she sort of figured out the whole sequence of events from these various clues and Takuma conspicuously avoiding certain subjects/acting disturbed when Orikasa Hanae and such came up. Though I think it's reasonable to say she didn't know the part about Takuma being her half-brother until the end. Possibly, as Kouichi mentions in the last chapter, that her father told

her shortly before she killed him, based on how she says she's "come to feel" that she wanted the child to be born, and that it would be some extension of Takuma's life. Meaning that she's mulled it over and has thought about how to feel about it – as in, not someone who enthusiastically had sex with her half-brother knowing who he was and not caring so much as someone who had sex with her boyfriend only to later realize that he wasn't just an orphan boy whose mother died between the buildings.

9. What's the nature of Chiho and Takuma's relationship? Does Takuma actually care about Chiho or is he doing it to keep up appearances?

Takuma has some level of affection for Chiho because she's the only person he ever felt emotionally close to at all. His life was all about revenge so he purposefully kept physical and emotional distance from everyone. He only interacted with others enough to not draw suspicion to himself. Part of the reason Chiho was able to figure out Takuma's plan was because of how close they became and him slipping up, what with him seeming disturbed whenever the topic of Orikasa Hanae came up. Ultimately he doesn't really love her though. Takuma is too consumed with his revenge to be really capable of love. She seems to love him, which is why she kept his child. It says explicitly that Takuma didn't love her, though she seems to have loved him based on that same passage. Partially because she was a lonely teenage girl and partially because he had saved her when she was younger and he had superpowers. The fact that she's willing to keep his child at the end even though she's 16 means she must still have cared about him even after all that. Which is kinda fucked up, given that he lied to her for over a year. Maybe she sympathized with what he was trying to do, getting revenge on her dad who really was an evil guy. She likely knew about Akari as well by that point. Maybe she's traumatized? I dunno.

One thought I had, which may have been intentional or maybe not, is that there's a parallel between Chiho's relationship with Takuma and Jousuke's relationship with the unknown pompadour guy. Both were saved by the other when they were small children (Though Chiho's life wasn't necessarily threatened) and both developed an admiration for the other as a selfless hero. Though Jousuke never meets his hero, and Chiho does. The theme to draw from that is maybe "it's better not to meet your heroes". And that Jousuke's judgement of "it doesn't matter if he's real or not" is the right one.

It's not clear when she learns that he's her half-brother. In the last chapter, Kouichi speculates either Takuma told her or her father told her. I don't think it makes sense for Takuma to have told her, as far as I can figure, so I guess her dad, Oogami Teruhiko, told her before she killed him. She did learn about that at SOME point.

10. What happened to Akari? (Also stuff like, what happened to her parents, why is she never found, etc.)

Akari never leaves the place between the buildings. Takuma goes to find her 12 years later and finds bits of her bones that were starting to become soil. Eventually, Oogami Teruhiko seemingly dispelled his Memory of Jet ability allowing Takuma to go there. But before that, the reason no one found her is because of his ability that prevented people from going to a place if he didn't want them to. No one could hear her because he'd fucked up her throat with poison doughnuts, and later on Akari decides she isn't going to make noise because of the risk Oogami might hear it and go kill her parents before anyone rescued her. Though Oogami Teruhiko says it affects hearing as well, when he's explaining his ability.

Her parents never knew what happened to her and died. They die 5 years before the main story takes place, so around 1994-1995. Though Takuma learned of his mother's face before that, so seemingly he knew what had happened to her, and that they were his grandparents, and he didn't tell them. Or if he did tell them, he doesn't mention it in the story. He said they were "acquaintances who waited at the same bus stop".

11. What are Oogami Teruhiko's plans/motivations?

He saw the money as a "medal" for doing so much risky illegal business. It was part of a ring of illegal work many people were involved with at the time of Morioh's expansion. So he gets rid of Akari at the risk of going to jail. He seems to be serious when he says he'll kill himself if he's found out. Later he derives joy from buying and doing things for his daughter. He called her what he "lives for". Takuma said he had "finally found something he cared about" with her. Though Oogami divorces her mother, possibly because she finds out about the scams or because he was cheating or some combination. He does seem to sleep around. Chiho specifically says it "was because of a

former lover of her father's" that they divorced. That may be Orikasa Hanae, though they divorced years before she died.

12. What happened to Oogami Teruhiko after the events of 1981-1982?

After Akari dies he gets married, has a daughter, and changes his name. Dunno why he changes his name to his wife's last name. Maybe to make it harder for him to be caught. Chiho is 1 year younger than Takuma, so she would've been conceived shortly after Takuma was born and Akari died.

It's possible the reason he married Chiho's mother is because he gotten her pregnant. She would have to have gotten pregnant AFTER Oogami Teruhiko pushed Akari between the buildings. Orikasa Hanae mentions he was getting married to someone while she was alive. How's this guy working a full-time job, keeping this scam thing a secret, keeping a woman alive between two buildings for a year, and banging all these chicks at once?

13. Who has the Memory of Jet Stand ability?

Oogami/Futaba Teruhiko. It's implied in one section of the book that Takuma was thinking about using the word "Jet" in his Stand name, but never actually does that. I think that's just a red herring.

14. What does the Memory of Jet ability do?

It prevents people from going to a certain place the user doesn't want them to go. It makes their "sense of direction go haywire".

15. Who's the guy from Jousuke's memory when he was 4?

We still don't know. Takuma dies before he can look it up. It's both an in-joke with the fans, given that it was never resolved because Araki decided he didn't want to do a time-jump plot for Part 4, and a way to give it closure. Otsu Ichi does a number of 4th-wall-breaking jokes stating the popular fan theory that it was Jousuke having gone back in time somehow, but Araki threw the idea out and just dropped the plot thread. The closure is Jousuke ultimately decided that the version of the guy in his head was more important than the actual guy.

16. What is Takuma's revenge plan and what actions has he taken off-screen?

Mainly it's impregnating Futaba Chiho. His idea seems to be that the only way to make Oogami Teruhiko feel the same pain his mother felt was to do that. It's also a grudge against his "bloodline". Though this did cause him to feel guilt for doing it to her. Basically his will for revenge was stronger. Also he found the guy's crimes and showed him the necklace. Basically it was him saying "I know". Oogami Teruhiko dying wasn't part of his plan though. That happened outside of Takuma's original intention.

17. Why did Chiho's house catch on fire?

Either Oogami/Futaba Teruhiko lit it in despair, as Takuma suggests, or Chiho set it in anger, or it was purely an accident. It seems there was some kind of altercation between him and Chiho after the end of chapter 3-8, where he says "It's dark..." Though the last chapter confirms he died because of the knife, not the fire. And Chiho seemed upset about the fire because it destroyed everything she owned. So that wasn't something she *wanted* to happen. It's likely that he lights the fire out of despair when he finds out she's pregnant, maybe he goes crazy. Maybe Chiho kills him defending herself.

There's a passage in the final chapter that implies it's something like that. Though it's just Kouichi speculating, it's probably our best guess.

"I imagined that night. The conversation between daughter and father. Blood spilled and flames burned everything. And at the focal point of all that, I'm sure, was this child."

18. Why does Oogami/Futaba Teruhiko say "It's dark"? What does he know at the end of 3-8?

He realizes that the "ultimate revenge" of him impregnating a woman, throwing her down between 2 buildings and keeping her there like a dog for a year only to let her die would be for Takuma, that child, making his daughter fall in love with that child incestuously impregnating her. It's meant to be a kind of "Make you feel the

pain she did" thing I think. Largely because he derived much of his self-worth from making his daughter like him, based on later chapters. Since he was divorced.

Takuma mentions that was the "real revenge" and the scam stuff was just side-entertainment. The "dark" part is a reference to the jet which is connected to Takuma because of his eyes that look like it. I think the reason for the name "Memory of Jet" means something like "Memory of Akari".

Earlier on in the story there's a passage where Takuma fights a guy with an angel ornament on his finger. That guy punches him and the ornament makes a gash in Takuma's cheek. Then he uses The Book to make the guy "relieve Takuma's experience". That may be an indication by the author of what Takuma considers "justice". Giving people a "taste of their own medicine". Making them "feel the experience they made someone else feel".

One of the themes of the story is like in *In Search of Lost Time*, where things spark old memories and feelings.

The Book is an extreme version of it, but also the necklace does that by sparking back the memory of Akari.

Jet also relates to the black horses in the postcard. Representing some sorta peace/freedom. Chiho finally going there at the end means she reaches peace. I think.

19. What's the significance of the religious references?

Now, this is maybe the vaguest one. All of the book's chapters start with parts of the traditional Christian Requiem Mass. I think part of that is just meant to be eerie and indicate "death has happened", because it's a funeral service thing. But it might be indicative of a larger theme. The whole story revolves around Takuma's meaning in life being revenge. And him going as far as killing Orikasa Hanae and attempting to kill Jousuke/Jousuke's mom to do it, even when they're largely innocent of any crimes, purely because they could interfere in his revenge. And ultimately not being able to love or know peace because of that revenge.

There's a few references to God in the book. He mentions the orphanage director was a "pious Christian" who said that God punished the wicked.

But Takuma says that whole "If God's so great how come evil people exist?" thing and basically takes justice into his own hands. The final chapter mentions that what happened with Chiho was "sinful", as well. Like apparently Kouichi is a good Christian boy at the end for some reason.

There's also mention of the Bible being the first printed book and the connection between books and religion. Oogami Teruhiko also says "Let's give thanks to God, you've been blessed" when Akari tells him she's pregnant with his child. This goes along with talk of her wanting to abort the baby since its father was so evil. Which is also a religiously charged subject.

Uh, let's see, what else. Akari said "If there was a God, then she hoped it would let her accomplish this. If it ended without any problems, she would sacrifice everything. Her blood, her flesh, her bone, it could take everything." which she does, ultimately. Her last few passages are filled with things like this about her accepting that she's in God's hands as she gives birth between the buildings. After Takuma is born she says "God had made him without missing even the smallest detail."

Not about God exactly but Takuma says "The flames of hell have enveloped the sinner" when he sees Chiho's house on fire.

Just a little before Takuma is finally beaten, he says Crazy Diamond has a "divine aura".

Takuma mentions that the place between the buildings as "It really was not the kind of place a human could live. It was cold and dark. A place abandoned by God."

The 2nd to last sentence is "God, please have mercy on that mother and child. May where the two of them are going have a peaceful home with food to eat."

So, this seems kinda all over the place, none of it seems to point to anything specific. But my guess is that Takuma's abandonment of God is a metaphor for the choices he made in his life. That and the chapter intros are a vague foreboding "people are gonna die", "leading up to something dark" kinda thing.

The theme seems to be abandoning god = doing an ends-justifies-the-means way of living. Abandoning love and embracing hatred, and thus losing peace. The grassy plain with the horses represented peace. Whereas Akari never sought revenge, and found peace in her final days before she died, seeing a grown-up Takuma in her dream and dreaming about the field with the horse. And Kouichi hoped Chiho would be forgiven and find peace as well. As Takuma picks hatred of Oogami Teruhiko over his affection for Futaba Chiho. Akari doesn't embrace a grudge or revenge, Takuma does it for her when she didn't even ask. She decides she just wants her child to survive, as one last thing to live for, imagining him growing up and such, after she's abandoned all hope of getting out herself. As one bit of hope to cling onto. It's a little preachy, cause it's kinda like "Be a good Christian, don't do evil" in that way, but I think works. It's more a metaphor for staying on the path of being a good person than a direct pro-religious thing. Japanese people tend to see Christianity as outsiders looking in. Like as something you read about in a textbook, rather than a specific ideology.

Ultimately Takuma's choices lead him to doing a lot of bad shit and making Chiho a victim along with hurting Jousuke's mom. He also kills Orikasa Hanae even though he doesn't really have to, because he didn't want her interfering with his revenge. In a way it's like Takuma is placing himself in the position of God, because he thinks he *has to* if he wants justice done, since in his view, God doesn't exist. So you could maybe label his philosophy as "the ends justify the means".

There was also a thing with the Mozart music and the fact that Mozart wrote a tune for the Christian Requiem Mass? Maybe that's important??? Maybe just a coincidence? I dunno. The actual words used in the chapter openings are relating to the end of days and various things about "taking mercy on the guilty".

His sins come back to him in the form of Okuyasu and Jousuke. But they ultimately don't want him dead and try to offer forgiveness anyhow, which he doesn't take. His revenge had totally consumed him.

I do think there's some string like that connecting all this but it is really vague. Lemme know what you think.

20. What are Takuma's plans after he gets revenge? Why does he kill himself?

Takuma WAS going to run away to some other city and start a new life. But he kills himself.

I'm really not sure why. Maybe because of guilt. Jousuke tries to save him even after he'd tried to kill Jousuke and badly injured Jousuke's mom.

Maybe it contradicted his worldview of a cold, unfeeling world and he realized what he did was wrong. He went too far, was too stepped in sin, getting his revenge. Also he'd impregnated a 16 year old, the only one that cared about him, to get revenge against her dad.

Or maybe he just wanted to die because his Stand was destroyed and he'd lost all his memories or something. It's really not clear if the pages disappearing from The Book meant he lost those memories for good or what. Maybe he was just not able to replay them anymore once the pages were ripped out but he still has his "recollections" of them, the kind he remembers without looking up. He rips out a page earlier to attack Jousuke's mom, and never re-uses it. And later he says he "had fewer memories now so the pages would turn faster". Maybe he just wanted to die because he was all fucked up and wanted to pain to end. It's hard to say anything definitively. He didn't really have much of anything to live for at that point, having fulfilled his life's goal. That may have been part of it, too.

One way to look at it was his entire worldview is centered around what the Stand provides him with. He mentions near the end "But he never felt lonely. He had this book. It was always with him, like it was watching over him." This ties into the larger theme of loneliness where his mother was lonely until she felt the presence of her child. Chiho was lonely, her parents divorcing and going to a new school where she didn't know anyone, until she met Takuma. Takuma's coping with loneliness is The Book, which really is just a search engine for his memories and not much else. He sees his Stand and the power it gives him as a way to fill that hole. He isn't able to healthily deal

with his loneliness. The Book is a poor substitute for actual human connection and he chooses to avoid the vulnerability that comes with caring about people with the control of his plot for revenge using his special powers that makes him feel extraordinary, and like someone who can do real justice.

Near the end, Takuma has a short internal monologue about how his memories would just disappear if he died. That they weren't leading anywhere. That they're be "absorbed by the ground" like how his mother became a part of Morioh. And that maybe that was why Chiho had been writing a novel, to preserve her memories. That may be an indication that he's come to some sort of realization that his life led nowhere, and that his revenge was hollow if it meant he'd sold his soul for it.

There's a small theme of "fate" in the story as well. The last spoken line is of Kouichi saying "Far away! Far away that even fate won't follow you!" You could say that given the conditions he was born in Takuma never had all that good prospects for the future. His father was evil and he inherited those genes to some degree. His mom never really did anything bad beyond not seeing some warning signs her boyfriend was abusive (He said not to tell her parents about him and she listened to him.) And Akari was resigned to her fate of being stuck between the buildings no matter what she did, though that was the result of the Memory of Jet Stand. Both Akari and Takuma could never get to that grassy plain of "peace", though Akari does sort of get to it in a sense she finds inner-peace, Takuma doesn't. He also dies as a result of falling from a roof, like his mother did (Though his mother didn't die from the fall). Maybe he was "fated" to be miserable, in some ways. And he wasn't able to make the right choices to get out of it. The story ends with Chiho and her child trying to "find peace" and "escape fate" by living out on the farm. Maybe? It's a bit of a stretch.

Jousuke is very antithetical to Takuma, being someone whose life and character was formed around this idea of the selfless guy from the snowy night, while Takuma's life is formed around the idea of getting revenge for his mother. He made the choice of rejecting love and embracing hatred and loneliness. It's mentioned they were both "chasing their fathers for so long", but they had opposite feelings for those fathers and one was a blood relative and one was not. Takuma also describes Crazy Diamond as having a "divine aura" shortly before he's beaten. In contrast to Takuma and his lack of faith in God and taking justice into his own hands. That may be an indication that Jousuke is the "righteous one" here. And ultimately, he's the one that wins over Takuma's personal "ends justify the means" justice.

It may tie along with the religious thing, feeling he was guilty from being too stepped in sin. All the memories of the bad things he did caught up to him. Maybe his rejecting Jousuke's help to save his life is a symbol for his rejection of ever abandoning his revenge over living a normal life. As Chiho says at the end "I've come to feel that when this child is born, it will mean that person's life won't have been completely wasted in the end."

Takuma rejects Jousuke's selflessness the same way he rejected Chiho's love. Or at the very least, he led a life that ended him up lonely and unable to love. That sounds pretty literature-y, right? Yeah, let's go with that. Best I can think of.

21. What's with the literary references?

Ok so this one isn't a mystery, but I figured I'd mention it anyhow. The primary one is Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (Also sometimes called *Remembrance of Things Past* and original in French as *À la recherche du temps perdu*). It's a super-long story, specifically it's known for being one of the longest stories ever written, and has themes of involuntary memory and of seeking meaning in life and the formation of experiences. Specifically there's a scene in the beginning when the main character eats a madeleine, a kind of French cookie, which takes him back to his memories of childhood. From what I've researched anyhow, I haven't finished the series though I've read some of it. It's also very introspective, which a decent amount of The Book is, though mostly it's about scheming murders, illegal housing, and throwing knives at a post with just the right number of spins in the air. Though really, a lot of *In Search of Lost Time* has themes which tie in to The Book in the way that Takuma both involuntarily remembers things as a child, causing him to attempt suicide multiple times, and that he decides that his purpose in life is to avenge his mother.

But also *In Search of Lost Time*, in seeking meaning in life, the main character examines the nature of love and connecting with other people and being understood VS the difficulty in doing so and being alone. Which this book also examines to some degree. Takuma isn't able to love Chiho, despite all the time they spend together, and so goes through with his plan of revenge where he impregnates her and results in her father dead and her house destroyed.

There's also a theme of appreciating life and the value of the everyday and art letting you see things from new perspectives. You could maybe tie that theme into *The Book* as well, because Chiho writes a novel and Takuma's ability allows him to closely examine events he originally saw as mundane when he found that information on them might be useful to him. It may also tie in to Akari and how she feels like she's "wasting her life" between the buildings, which the main character of *In Search of Lost Time* does in the beginning as well, which is what prompts his search for meaning in life. Her using the postcard with the horses and the field as a means of escape may also be a reference to the theme of "appreciating life with greater intensity". Possibly you could see Takuma's suicide at the end as a failure to realize these themes by replacing love, art, and appreciation of the everyday as meanings for life with spending his life seeking revenge. Though as far as I know, there's nobody going after revenge or murdering anyone in *In Search of Lost Time*. It's more decrying snobbery and jealousy. Like Proust is against the idea that any specific class of people is free of being petty.

Also there's a bunch of references to stuff Araki has written. Obviously the dropped plotline in Part 4, but also there's a casual reference to Gorgeous Irene and Mashounen (Devil Boy) BT. Plus a bunch of other books like *The Neverending Story*, *The History of Books*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, and the author Unno Jyuuza, considered to be the founding father of Japanese sci-fi. There's *Two Years' Vacation* by Jules Verne, also. But I think those are just general references to books, rather than anything thematic.

Speaking of searching for lost time, it took me 5 years and hundreds of hours to translate this novel. I sure ain't getting that time back. And it's only 93,000 words unlike Proust's that's 1,267,000. Gah, time sure flies. I think it was worth it, though. Anyhow I recommend Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, go read that.

Timeline of Events

Earlier Events: Akari goes to the city, can't find a job, moves home to Morioh.

Oogami Teruhiko starts his illegal building scam.

Oogami Teruhiko takes Orikasa Hanae as a lover (knew each other as teens though) and cheats on her.

Early 1980: Morioh starts developing to become a commuter town to S City.

1980-1981: Akari starts her job working at the housing office, the same place as Oogami Teruhiko.

Akari and Oogami Teruhiko start dating.

Oogami is stabbed with an arrowhead that fell off the shelf of an antique shop in Western Europe. Leaves a horse-shaped scar.

This is also likely when he gained his Stand.

Oogami gives Akari a jet necklace he got from Western Europe.

End of July 1981: Akari is 21. Orikasa Hanae calls Akari.

She takes the bag of money from Oogami Teruhiko's house.

She's pushed between the buildings around 6PM.

Various other events with Akari between the buildings occur over the course of about a year.

They don't have dates because Akari can't tell what day it is.

Though you can kinda tell based on the season/weather and the lines she draws on the walls.

Early 1982: Oogami Teruhiko gets married to Chiho's unnamed mom.

Oogami Teruhiko changes his name to Futaba Teruhiko for some reason.

Around May/June/July 1981: Takuma is born and gains the ability to 'not forget' from his mother's will. Akari dies between the buildings.

June 10th 1982: Takuma is delivered as a baby to the temple. Takuma, age 0, is brought to a home for infants.

1983: Takuma is 1 year old and is brought to the orphanage.

1987: Takuma is 5. Reads to Crybaby Boy. Finds out he has special memory abilities. The adults at the orphanage get him tested to see if he's a genius. Takuma observes the people in the town while he's eating ice cream at the café in front of the train station.

Winter 1987: Jousuke is 4. Takuma is 5. Jousuke is rescued in the snow by Araki's dropped plot thread.

1988: Around here, in his 1st year of elementary school, so age 6-7, Takuma identifies a purse snatcher.

1990: Takuma is 8, 2nd year of elementary school. Takuma is involved in a car accident.

1992: Takuma is 10. 4th year of elementary school. Takuma tries to kill himself with scissors. Leaves permanent scars on both arms. Takuma jumps out of hospital window, falls into shrubs and heavily injures himself. Takuma gains The Book ability (Sees the leather-bound book). Takuma first learns of what happened to his mother Akari.

Sometime after this, Takuma starts stalking his father, Oogami/Futaba Teruhiko.

1993-1994: Around here, when Takuma is in his 6th year of elementary school so he would be 11 or 12, Takuma steals 10 knives. Starts practicing throwing them by throwing them at a wooden pole.

1994: Takuma is 12. He gets the Spanish flu. Takuma goes to the place between the buildings to investigate his mother's remains. (Didn't go earlier because he wasn't brave enough) Takuma finds the postcard with the horses on the field. Also finds the jet necklace there, dedicates his life to revenge on his father. Takuma starts investigating Oogami Teruhiko and over the course of 5 years collects info on all the people he'd worked with and scammed.

Sometime after that: Akari's parents die. The wife dies 6 months before the husband. Around here, when Chiho is in her 6th year of elementary school, her parents start fighting.

October 21st 1995: Chiho, age 12, runs away from home over her parents fighting. Likely because her mom found out about Oogami Teruhiko's illegal stuff. She is attacked at the train station by a delinquent. Takuma rescues her.

1997-1998: Chiho is in her 2nd year of middle school. She talks to her friend at the family restaurant about high school and she tries on makeup for the first time. Chiho decides she wants to become a writer. Shortly after this, after graduating middle school (finishing 3rd year) Takuma moves out of the orphanage to live on his own.

March 1999: At the end of Chiho's 3rd (and last) year of middle school, she meets Takuma for the first time at the Thorn Building. She learns about his "memorize everything" ability.

1999: The events of Part 4 take place.
Around October, Takuma buys 3 knives.

January 3rd 2000:

Takuma finds Orikasa Hanae based on tracing the lily-shaped broach he saw from his memories.
Takuma attacks Orikasa Hanae (age 39) with his ability and she slowly bleeds to death. (Oogami Teruhiko had been paying her to keep quiet)
He leaves the cat alive because his ability doesn't work on cats.

January 4th 2000: The "present timeline" event at the beginning of the novel start. Takuma is 17, Chiho is 16.

Takuma is a 2nd year at Budougao High School, everyone else is a 1st year. Jousuke and co are assumably ~16.
Rohan is 20.

High schoolers are on winter vacation.

Trinita the cat gets all bloody and approaches Rohan and Kouichi. This leads them to discover Orikasa Hanae's body and start investigating.

January 6th 2000: The last day of winter vacation.

Chiho and Takuma look for the moaning book in the Thorn Building library. Discuss Orikasa Hanae's death.

January 7th 2000:

Kouichi and co. are searching the school for somebody with red marks on their arms.

Jousuke fixes Takuma's pen when it breaks after a delinquent boy spits on his shoe.

Takuma uses his Stand to attack delinquent boy that spat on his shoe.

January 11th 2000:

Kouichi and co. continue looking for person with red marks on their arms.

Jousuke confronts Takuma but they find that lots of people had the red marks on their arms, put there with Takuma's ability.

Chiho starts to suspect Takuma killed Orikasa Hanae. (Maybe more?)

January 15th 2000:

Takuma and Chiho go to Tonio's restaurant.

Takuma fights delinquent with the angel ring with a knife.

Chiho learns Takuma was the one that saved her for sure.

Chiho and Takuma start dating.

Shortly after:

Jousuke's mom opens an envelope from Takuma that had used his Stand, causing her to be attacked by his suicide memory.

The cause of Jousuke's mom's injury isn't found because the page disappears when Takuma goes more than 30 meters away. (He actually says this explicitly at one point)

Jousuke and co. investigate the boy at the used bookstore and start investigating based on the criteria of the culprit living near a swing, slide, and a stopped clock.

Late February 2000:

Chiho meets Yukako and Kouichi studying at the Thorn Building.

March 17th 2000:

There's a record-breaking snowstorm and it's the day of the term-ending ceremony.

Jousuke and co. learn about Takuma from the orphanage.

Takuma meets Chiho at Oogami/Futaba Teruhiko's house.

Takuma talks to Chiho for the last time.

Chiho kills Oogami/Futaba Teruhiko with a kitchen knife and burns the house down.
Takuma fights Okuyasu and Jousuke at the Thorn Building.
Takuma dies by taking off his jacket while Jousuke is holding him off the edge of the roof by it.

August 2000: The final subchapter takes place with Kouichi wondering what happened.
Chiho is living with her mother and comes to Morioh to visit.
Reveals she's pregnant with Takuma's baby.

I sure spent a lot of time thinking about this book. Anyhow, I hope you enjoyed all that. I'm gonna go back to reading *In Search of Lost Time*.